

# FLAME Regional Bias Series: Bulgaria

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The lands occupied by the modern country of Bulgaria were once the borderlands of the Eastern Roman Empire. Bulgaria is one of the best populated regions in the FLAME database with c. 367 finds, comprising over 117,580 coins from around 23 mints. This makes it important that users of the FLAME database be aware of all the potential pitfalls and biases that are inherent in data from the region.

## Geography

Bulgaria's geography is characterized by a combination of lowlands and mountains. South of the river Danube is the Danubian plain, site of the Late Antique Danubian *limes*, a region with rich alluvial soil, stretching from Bulgaria's border with Serbia to the Black Sea. To the south is the Old/Balkan mountain, which divides the country in two. It decreases in height in the eastern parts, making transit between the two halves of the mountain easier. The landscape on both sides of the mountain is characterized by depressions, river valleys, and basins, arranged in a bead-like fashion from west to the east. The largest of these is the Sofia field, where the capital of Bulgaria, Sofia (ancient *Serdica*), is located. The southwestern regions of Bulgaria represent a combination of high mountains like the Rila, Pirin, and Rhodope mountains and larger river valleys, like those of the Struma (ancient *Strymon*) and Mesta (ancient *Nestos*) valleys. Meanwhile, the southeast of the country is occupied by the Upper Thracian plain, which extends from the city of Pazardzhik, in the west, to Adrianople, in the east.

## Coinage

The region was extremely close to the heartland of the Roman Empire after the creation of the new capital of Constantinople. Therefore, it is not surprising that the majority of coins found were issued by the imperial mints of Constantinople and Thessalonica. The Propontic mints are also represented, as well as the smaller Balkan mints of Sirmium and Siscia. There was also smaller circulation of other imperial mints

like Trier, Rome, Carthage, Alexandria, Aquileia, and Antioch, with these becoming progressively less important throughout the period. These lands were periodically invaded by different non-Roman groups, such as the Huns, Visigoths, Ostrogoths, Avars, Slavs, and finally Bulgars. However, none of these groups left a monetary imprint on the region. There are also single and rare finds of Sassanian coinage in the region. Perhaps not surprisingly, bronze is the most common metal among coins found in both single finds and excavations, with gold predominantly appearing in a few large hoards and museum collections. More than 95% of the coins in our database were minted in the 4th century, although this may be simply a product of the huge hoards of low-resolution Constantinian bronzes like the Varna 1909 hoard, which alone contains 112,000 coins. The region was a periphery of the Byzantine Empire for the rest of the period, with its northern part being permanently lost to the nascent Bulgar Khanate in 681. Thrace remained under imperial control despite invasions by the Slavs in the 6th and 7th centuries.

## Modern context and biases

The modern state of the scholarship has been detailed very well by Andrei Gandila in the introduction to *Cultural Encounters on Byzantium's Northern Frontier, c. AD 500-700* (Cambridge University Press, 2018). In short, modern scholarship of the region still suffers from the legacy of nativist, irredentist, and ideologically-charged scholarship that was characteristic of the period before 1989. In addition, Bulgarian scholars suffer from chronic underfunding (meaning that most publication relies upon individual scholarly initiative), which has led to relatively few museum collections being fully published. In addition, key circulation studies and excavation reports remain not only under-digitized, but also rare in print.

All of this is compounded by legal disincentives for reporting finds. The *Law for the Cultural Heritage of the Republic of Bulgaria* prohibits the purchase, selling, or collecting of all non-milled coins on the territory of modern Bulgaria. Ancient coins, purchased abroad, must be reported to the relevant authorities and certified. Moreover, every coin found in the ground is considered property of the state. Metal-detecting occupies a grey area and so is highly risky for practitioners. This means that the reporting of stray finds by individuals is practically non-existent, despite being mandatory. The only legal collections of pre-modern coins are those of state institutions, such as universities and museums, or of private persons who have purchased such coins abroad. This has encouraged a black market for both original and fake coins, with Bulgaria being particularly famous for the latter. A lack of enforcement means that treasure hunters still syphon thousands of coins out of the country every year. This potentially leads to a massive bias in coin data for the Balkans.

Finally, while English has been making inroads into publications and academic journals, scholarship is still mainly conducted in Bulgarian, and knowledge of the language remains invaluable for any would-be student of the region. This situation has been improving recently, with both non-local and local scholars producing more and more work on the region and attempting to make their work available online. Prominent examples include Cecile Morrisson, Vladislav Popović, and Vujadin Ivanišević's seminal work *Les trésors monétaires byzantins des Balkans et d'Asie Mineure (491-713)*, the ongoing publication series, *Coin Collections and Coin Hoards from Bulgaria* by Ilija Prokopov (covering Western Bulgaria), and Stoyan Mihaylov and Andrei Gandila's bibliography on Moesia Secunda and Scythia Minor. In addition, the Archaeological Institute of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences publishes an annual volume with reports for finds and archeological excavations that it conducted in a given year. The only online databases that I am aware of for the region are the *Coin Hoards of the Roman Empire Online* (<https://chre.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/>) for hoards from the 4th and 5th centuries and Andrei Gandila's Thessaloniki dataset for Byzantine bronzes from Thessaloniki for the 6th and early 7th centuries. (<https://coinage.princeton.edu/flames-datasets/>).

## The present state of the FLAME database

The above-mentioned datasets form an important part of FLAME's materials for Bulgaria. However, this outsized number of finds has created an imbalance in FLAME's database, which skews it in favor of earlier finds (e.g., entries from the CHRE database and large 4th-century hoards like the "Varna 1909 hoard" of 4th century bronzes) and in favor of the mint of Thessaloniki in the Byzantine period (e.g., the various coin finds from Gandila's Thessaloniki dataset). The first asymmetry is more or less reflective of reality, since 4th century bronzes are ubiquitous in Bulgaria. However, the latter has created a seemingly outsized role for the mint of Thessaloniki in relation not only to Constantinople—which dominates the monetary economy of Bulgaria due to Thrace's proximity to the imperial capital—but also to smaller mints like Nikomedia and Cyzicus, which have large numbers of coins that have not yet been inputted into the database (e.g., the finds from the Gradishte Fortress near Gabrovo).<sup>1</sup> This is a testament to the comprehensiveness of Andrei Gandila's work on the mint of Thessalonica, but to ensure accurate representation of monetary circulation in Bulgaria, future data input into FLAME should include finds with coins from these other mints, particularly from the 6th century and early 7th centuries. In addition, once COVID restrictions are lifted, local scholars with access to undigitized sources on archeological sites and museums in the

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<sup>1</sup> Mihaylov, Stoyan. „Монети от крепостта Градище край Габрово.“ *Regional Museum of History – Veliko Tarnovo: Proceedings XXII* (2012): 139-181.

region should provide an invaluable corrective to the above biases. Finally, special attention should be paid to mints in the Western Balkans, as well as Ostrogothic and Gepid imitations, which seem to be underrepresented in FLAME's dataset.