

FLAME Regional Bias Series: Ukraine

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Geography

Most of Ukraine's territory lies within the East European Plain, which includes several lowlands and uplands. In addition, the country is located in four natural zones: forest (northern regions), forest-steppe (eastern, central and western regions), steppe (southern regions), and mountain (Carpathian and Crimean mountains). The climate is temperate continental throughout almost the whole state. However, access to the Black Sea and the Azov Sea is the reason for the specific nature of the southern regions of Ukraine: the predominance of steppe relief, as well as a warmer and wetter climate. In addition, the area is rich in freshwater resources: the biggest rivers are the Dnieper, Dniester, Southern Bug, Seversky Donets, etc.

Coinage

The early history of coinage on the modern territory of Ukraine is connected with the existence of ancient Greek cities in the Northern Black Sea Region, many of which produced their own coins (from the 6th century BC in Olbia, Berezan', Panticapaeum; from the 5th century BCE in Nikonion, Kerkinitis, Theodosia, Nymphaea; from the 4th century BCE in Tyras, Tamirak, Chersonesos). The Bosporan kingdom minted its own coins until the beginning of the 4th century CE, but the mint in Chersonesos operated until the 11th century CE.



Figure 1: Map of Ukraine

Coins from these centers also reached the barbarian tribes living in the forest-steppe zone, such as the Scythians. However, Scythian (e.g., Skil, Ateus, Skilur) and Sarmatian (e.g., Farzoios, Inismeus) rulers also used ancient mints for their coinage. Greek coins

(mainly those of Philip II and Alexander the Great) and barbarian imitations of them also found their way into the domain of the Celtic tribes, mainly in western Ukraine, or to populations exposed to Celtic influence. The inflow of the first Roman coins is linked to the Geto-Dacian population, among whom Roman republican denarii and imitations spread. The distribution of Roman imperial coins is mainly connected to the existence of the Chernyakhiv archaeological culture, most often associated with the Goths. The vast majority of them consist of denarii of the 1st-2nd (3rd) century CE, but antoniniani are also common, as are Roman provincial issues, aurei, imitations of Roman coins (silver, silver-plated, gold, and gold-plated), cast or plated copies of denarii, and Late Roman coinages.

Among the Late Roman coins, the most frequent finds are bronze issues: AE2, but more often AE3 and AE4. Most bronze issues date from the time of Constantine, Valentinian, and Theodosius. Other denominations are rarer—for example, 4th-century siliqua or 4th to mid-5th-century solidi (or their fractions). A special group of finds consists of Late Roman gold medallions, concentrated in the Volhynia and Middle Dniester regions. A characteristic feature of the Late Roman coins is that they were minted in the Danubian provinces (e.g., Siscia, Sirmium) or the Eastern Roman Empire mints (e.g., Thessalonica, Constantinople, Nicomedia, Cyzicus, Antioch, Alexandria). Coins minted in the western empire are rare (where they occur, they are mainly part of solidi finds).

The volume of early Byzantine coinage is much more modest. Above all, we see bronze denominations: most often 40 nummi (i.e., follis), but also lower denominations. The dynasties of Justinian and Heraclius are associated with finds of solidi, both in hoards or in single finds. It should be noted that circulation of the early Byzantine coins in the region was largely influenced by the activity of the mint in Chersonesus: its products—mainly bronze denominations—are widely known in Crimea, but they also spread northwards to the early Slavic tribes and to the territory of the Khazar Khaganate, where they also imitated early Byzantine coins.

Coin find data: Sources of information

There are at least three places in which data on ancient coin finds, including from the late Roman and early Byzantine periods, from the territory of Ukraine can be found: published finds in the scholarly literature, data from online databases of finds, and data from the public sources of information on the Internet. A major problem for research scholars today is the weak interrelationship between these three spheres.

There is no up-to-date catalogue of ancient coin finds on the territory of Ukraine. For finds of Roman and early Byzantine coins, the catalogues of Mykhailo Braichev'skyi¹ and Vladislav Kropotkin² (both more than sixty years old) form the basis, which mainly include data on coin finds found in the second half of the 19th and early 20th centuries. This information is often unverified and may lead to an incorrect picture with respect to the actual distribution of coins. An excellent example of this is the so-called concentration of late Roman bronze coin finds in the upper reaches of the Dniester, mainly minted in the Western Roman Empire, information about which was allegedly collected by Eduard Benesh. Based on this information, historians hypothesized the existence of a socially and geographically unique, coin-producing territory in this region, connecting it to the peculiarities of the region's ethnocultural development in the Late Roman period.³ However, a closer look at the structure of these finds, and the circumstances of their discovery led to the conclusion that it was probably an early 20th-century hoax.⁴ All this shows the urgent need to verify the old data thoroughly.

After the catalogues of Braichevs'kyi and Kropotkin (with later additions) were issued, the only attempt at cataloguing the Ukrainian finds of Roman coins was an unpublished PhD thesis by Kyrylo Myzgin.⁵ Therefore, in general, the information on ancient coin finds on the territory of Ukraine is contained in hundreds of scattered publications, published mainly in Ukrainian or Russian, less often in Polish or English. At the same time, it should be noted that several special numismatic editions, such as *Numismatics and Phaleristics*,⁶ *The Ukrainian Numismatic Annual*,⁷ *Lviv Numismatic Notes*, etc., make regular contributions to the field.

The situation is not better in terms of databases or other digital sources. The most extensive information is available in the *Coin Hoards of the Roman Empire* (CHRE)

¹ Braichevs'kyi, M. Yu. 1959. *Rymska moneta ta terytorii Ukrainy*. Kyiv.

² Kropotkin, V.V. 1961. *Klady rimskikh monet na territorii SSSR, Svod arkheologicheskikh istochnikov G4-4*, Moscow; Kropotkin, V.V. 1962. *Klady vizantijskikh monet na territorii SSSR, Svod arkheologicheskikh istochnikov E4-4*, Moscow.

³ For example, based on the concentration of coins issued by Western mints, Professor Boris Magomedov constructed the hypothesis of the "Przeworsk Coin Province", according to which the local population served in the Roman army in the Empire's western provinces. See: Magomedov, B. 2008. Coins as a source of insight on Chernyakhiv tribes, in: A. Bursche, Aleksander, R. Ciolek, and R. Wolters (eds.), *Roman Coins outside the Empire: Ways and Phases, Contexts and Functions* (Collection Moneta 82), Wetteren, 172-5.

⁴ Degler, A., and Myzgin, K. 2017. New information on finds of Roman coins from Western Ukraine: L'vivska oblast', *Notae Numismaticae / Zapiski Numizmatyczne* XI, 150-1

⁵ Myzgin, K. V. 2010. *Antichnye monety na pamyatnikah chernyahovskoj kul'tury*. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Institute of Archaeology of National Academy of Science of Ukraine. Kyiv.

⁶ <https://www.numismatics.kiev.ua> (access data: 22.06.2023).

⁷ <https://numismatic-journal.com/index.php/journal> (access data: 22.06.2023).

project database,⁸ which contains data on 249 deposits (as of June 19, 2023), including hoards and single finds of 4th–5th century CE gold coins. Relatively exhaustive information on finds of Roman coins, but only for three regions of Western Ukraine—Lviv, Ternopil and Ivano-Frankivsk—can be found in the *Finds of Roman Coins from Poland and Lands Historically Connected with Poland* (AFE-PL).⁹ This resource includes published and verified data, archival information, and recent finds. Information on gold coin discoveries can be found in the *Roman Gold Coins from the Barbaricum* database (RGCB),¹⁰ which is still under development. The FLAME project database includes findings of Late Roman and Early Byzantine coins in Ukraine from both old and recent publications (though mostly old).

Finally, the most extensive sources of information are public internet resources that report treasure hunters' discoveries. The most considerable information can be found on the treasure-hunting site, *Violity*, which consists of a forum and an auction site. On the forum, users post pictures of their finds, often with scale and weight, with a request to identify and/or value a particular item. Coin identification and valuation is often carried out by users affiliated with the site as experts (usually very experienced collectors with a great deal of practice and erudition in numismatics).

Unfortunately, finders very rarely specify the location or region of the find; this information has to be determined and verified in each case using a careful, critical approach. Late Roman and early Byzantine coins are primarily published in two sections of this forum: *Coins of the Ancient States*¹¹ and *Coins of Byzantium and the Christian East*.¹² More often than not, coins identified on the forum are sold at auction by *Violity* in their respective sections.¹³ Moreover, a preliminary discussion of the coin(s) on the forum and an evaluation of the authenticity and value by experts is, if not obligatory, a desirable condition for putting the lot up for sale.

In addition to *Violity*, information about coin finds (including pictures) can be found on several social networking groups, such as Facebook. The total number of amateur finds is difficult to estimate. For example, in 2014, at least 36,000 ancient (primarily Roman)

⁸ <https://chre.ashmus.ox.ac.uk> (access data: 22.06.2023).

⁹ https://coindb-prod.ocean.icm.edu.pl/AFE_PL (access data: 22.06.2023).

¹⁰ <https://rgcb.lach.uw.edu.pl> (access data: 22.06.2023).

¹¹ <https://forum.violity.com/viewforum.php?f=243&sid=1a7141c0c0331f1650d3dd8cc4e6b21f> (access data: 22.06.2023).

¹² <https://forum.violity.com/viewforum.php?f=244&sid=1a7141c0c0331f1650d3dd8cc4e6b21f> (access data: 22.06.2023).

¹³ https://violity.com/ua/auction/174-numizmatika?filter=1&sort=03&utm_source=sorting_active (access data: 22.06.2023). As of June 2023, the auction had approximately 142,000 registered users and a half million active lots, including more than eleven thousand active numismatic lots.

coins were posted on the *Violity* forum.¹⁴ The scale of treasure hunting in Ukraine is alarming: in 2016, there were more than 26,000 detectors.¹⁵ Today that number may be at least quadrupled. The amount of information about new finds requiring confirmation and careful verification contrasts sharply with the small number of professional numismatists in Ukraine who are able and willing to do so. The availability of good information is biased either toward particular small regions or particular categories of finds.

Coin finds and the law

In Ukraine, as in other Eastern European countries, there is no specific legislation dealing only with coin finds. The issue falls within the general framework of cultural heritage protection. Today, this is regulated by the Civil Code of Ukraine, as well as by two laws, in particular: “On the Protection of Cultural Heritage” and “On the Protection of Archaeological Heritage.” The Civil Code, for example, regulates the procedure for the acquisition of ownership of treasure (Article 343), according to which treasure, which includes the monetary hoard, is defined as “*money, currency, other valuables buried in the ground or otherwise hidden, the owner of which is unknown or has lost the right of ownership by law.*” The two laws, in turn, contain a critical definition of a “cultural heritage (archaeological) monument”—that is, an object listed in the State Register of the Heritage Monuments. The broadness of this definition has had a negative impact on overall coin find declarations in Ukraine, since it is virtually impossible to prove the connection between a particular object from a private collection and a specific object in the Register. For this reason, most collectors in Ukraine do not declare coin finds in their possession. Moreover, coin discoverers often prefer to lie about the circumstances of their finds rather than admit that they were found on an archaeological site.¹⁶

Ancient numismatics and the war

Since 2014, due to Russian aggression, there have been disastrous changes in the registration and study of ancient coin finds in Ukraine. Russia’s annexation of Crimea has made it impossible for Ukrainian researchers to study coin finds in the region. Russia’s open aggression against Ukraine, beginning February 24, 2022, and the

¹⁴ Bogucki, M. and Myzgin, K. 2021. The law and practice regarding coin finds: Poland and Ukraine, *Compte rendu* 68, 2021, 23.

¹⁵ Hardy, S.A. 2016. Black Archaeology’ in Eastern Europe: Metal Detecting, Illicit Trafficking of Cultural Objects, and ‘Legal Nihilism’ in Belarus, Poland, Russia, and Ukraine, *Public Archaeology* 15, 214-237. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14655187.2017.1410050>

¹⁶ For more details, see: Bogucki, M. and Myzgin, K. 2021. The law and practice regarding coin finds: Poland and Ukraine, *Compte rendu* 68, 2021, 22-3.

subsequent occupation of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions (as well as parts of the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions) have so far removed these regions from the reach of numismatic researchers, as well. Several museums whose collections contained ancient coins have either been destroyed, looted by Russian troops, or remain under constant threat of shelling. The same is true of private coin collections.

The war has also caused changes in the treasure-hunting scene. For example, in regions where active military operations are taking place or have taken place, there is no archaeological research or treasure hunting. This is especially true in mined areas, which currently comprise about 40% of the country. On the other hand, due to the internal migration from dangerous regions into Western or Central Ukraine, the activity of treasure hunters in those areas is greater than before the war. The economic crisis caused by the war has slowed academic research in archaeology and numismatics and both looting and sale of coins has significantly increased.

Summary

The active and practically uncontrolled illegal treasure hunting in Ukraine, which results in the discovery of tens of thousands of ancient coins every year, starkly contrasts with the relatively small number of coins published in print or online. Related to this problem is the low activity of archaeological research in Ukraine and the small number of professional numismatists who study not only coins but also coin finds. The result is a significant distortion of the real picture of distribution of ancient coins in Ukraine, including late Roman and early Byzantine coins. This situation is exacerbated by Russian aggression and Russia's occupation of Ukrainian territories.