

FLAME Regional Bias Series: Greece

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This paper provides an overview of the most common biases that affect the study of Late Roman and Early Byzantine numismatics in the southern Balkans, especially within the territory of Modern Greece. The FLAME dataset that concerns this region includes excavation finds, hoards, and single finds. Although the dataset is continuously updated with new information, it is essential to acknowledge and address biases that may exist within the data to limit their impact on research results. At present the focus remains ensuring the accuracy and reliability of the data, with the goal of having precise data before testing specific hypotheses or identifying distinct patterns.

Dark Data

One of the significant challenges in the study of numismatic information that concerns the territory of Modern Greece is the existence of "Dark data,"¹ a term that refers to coins that are not known or documented, and can lead to statistical distortions.

These unknown coins can be categorized into three groups:

1. Poorly preserved coin finds that are illegible and cannot be classified.
2. Coins that are unearthed during excavations but remain unpublished or only partially published.
3. Coins that have been looted and are unlikely to ever be documented or published.



MAINLAND GREECE AND ISLANDS

Additional challenges may be considered under

¹ We use the term Dark data following the definition of David Hand: "Dark data are concealed from us, and that very fact means that we are at risk of misunderstanding, of drawing incorrect conclusions, and of making poor decisions." See: Hand, David. *Dark Data: Why What You Don't Know Matters*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2020, 4.

the headings of data accuracy and reliability. One significant challenge is to judge the impact of missing values and data integrity issues, particularly in the preliminary archeological reports. In addition to these challenges, we must also account for inherent biases present in archeological and historical studies.

Data Collection Problems

The journals that publish excavation results serve as the primary sources for data collection for the region. The report sections of *Archaeologikon Deltion*, *Praktika of the Archaeological Society at Athens*,² the *Annual of the British School at Athens*, the *Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique*,³ and *Hesperia*,⁴ provide valuable information for coins found in archeological contexts.

In particular, *Archaeologikon Deltion* publishes the preliminary reports of the excavations organized by the Greek Ministry of Culture. While these reports do yield valuable insights, significant details related to coins are frequently absent. Coins found in fieldwork are mainly used for dating archeological layers, along with pottery findings. As a result, they are usually described briefly, without providing information about denomination, mint, etc. Moreover, it can take years or even decades until the coins are studied and published. Under the current archeological law, directors of systematic excavations have exclusive rights to publish their findings. A final publication should be completed within five years of concluding the excavation. In this time, the director may, but need not, authorize separate publications of excavation reports or field research by other scholars. Directors of rescue excavations have six years to publish the results; if they choose not to, the archeological service is responsible for assigning publication to someone else. However, in practice, this period is often extended, with projects remaining in the hands of the original director(s).

The issue of incomplete data becomes even more pronounced when considering looted coins. The existing archeological law⁵ protects all movable archeological monuments—defined as dating before 1830—from illegal excavation, theft, or illegal export. Private collections of coins are under the supervision and licensing of a

² For the fieldwork of the Archeological Society, see: <https://www.archetai.gr/index.php?p=exchavations&lang=en>

³ For the fieldwork of the French school at Athens, see: <https://www.efa.gr/sites-de-fouilles/>

⁴ For the fieldwork of the American school of Classical Studies at Athens, see: <https://www.ascsa.edu.gr/excavations>

⁵ Law No. 4858/2021 (published in *Governmental Gazette* 220/A/19-11-2021) which can be found at: <https://www.e-nomothesia.gr/kat-arxaiotites/nomos-4858-2021-phek-220a-19-11-2021.html>

specialized unit under the Directorate of the Management of the National Archive of Monuments, Documentation, and Protection of Cultural Goods.

The use of metal detectors requires authorization from the archeological service for each use, and the user must declare the intended research areas. Metal detectors cannot be used within or near archeological/historic sites, protected zones, or close to monuments.⁶ Unfortunately, illegal excavations and looting remain a recurring problem.⁷ Looted coins confiscated by local Police Directorates are usually rapidly summarized in *Archaeologikon Deltion* (these are typically not full publications, lacking crucial details, such as mints, etc.). Such looted coins represent a significant number of the total, whose exact provenance or stratigraphic position remain unknown. Typically, the only available information for these coins is their quantity and dating. Customs, port, and police authorities play a crucial role in the protection and repatriation of antiquities. The coins that are confiscated or repatriated are rapidly published and placed under the care of the Numismatic Museum.⁸ To date, there are no comprehensive publications of these coins.

Challenges in Studying Published Coins

Studying published coins also presents certain challenges, with a lack of standardized definitions being one. Specifically, scholars can define "hoard" differently, leading to disparate statistical outcomes and interpretations. Some hoards may represent curated savings or "pocket-money," providing insights into circulation, while in other cases, coins found together in an archaeological context are also labeled as hoards—often referred to collectively as "accumulation hoards." These varying definitions can result in different interpretations. Additionally, confirmation bias may influence historical interpretation, because earlier scholarship heavily relied on coins, especially from hoards, to validate information from historical sources.⁹ Although historical research has challenged older theories in recent decades, there remain cases in archaeology where dating systems based on those theories persist. For example, the chronology of the

⁶ Law No. 3028/2002 (published in *Governmental Gazette* 153/A).

⁷ See the UNESCO report: https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/greece_2011-15natrep_1970_en.pdf

⁸ Accessed at: https://www.culture.gov.gr/DocLib/arthro45_Nomos3028_2002.pdf. For example, see: <https://www.culture.gov.gr/el/Information/SitePages/view.aspx?nID=1304> and <https://www.mfa.gr/germany/geniko-proxeneio-monahou/news/epanapatrismos-arkhaion-ellenikon-nomismaton-me-te-sundrome-tou-genikou-proxeneiou-monakhou.html>

⁹ For a critical view of the traditional historiographical interpretations of linking of invasions with hoarding patterns and new interpretations, see Curta, Florin, and Andrei Gândila. "Hoards and Hoarding Patterns in the Early Byzantine Balkans." *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 65/66 (2011): 45–47; Curta, Florin. *The Making of the Slavs: History and Archaeology of the Lower Danube Region c. 500-700*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, esp. p. 169-171 (with previous bibliography).

destruction levels of various late antique sites often relies exclusively on the chronology of the latest identifiable coin found, without taking into account the coin's wear (and by extension its length of circulation).¹⁰ At the same time, pottery found in the same strata is often misdated.¹¹ Consequently, this pottery is sometimes employed in dating other sites, creating a scenario where various sites are indirectly dated without a critical examination of the archaeological data.

Archaeological Interpretation Biases

The dataset is also subject to biases resulting from archeological research. The geographic distribution of finds is uneven, with certain sites being extensively studied and published, and others remaining absent from the map.

Modern urban centers such as Athens, Thessaloniki, Patras, and others are subject to ongoing archeological excavation, driven primarily by the necessity for salvage excavations during construction projects (including metro construction). In addition to these salvage excavations, urban centers are also the focus of extensive archeological research through long-term fieldwork projects. Furthermore, sites and regions like Argos, Chios, Corinth, Delos, Delphi, Gortyn, Knossos, Kos, Messini, Nemea, Olympia, Philippi, and Thasos have been systematically excavated for decades, while others remain underrepresented.

It is imperative to acknowledge regions where archaeological data remains limited, since this creates an imbalance in our scholarly comprehension of the overall archaeological landscape. Moreover, in such cases, there is a tendency for over-interpretation of well-represented sites, potentially leading to over-generalization to compensate for a lack of data. For example, the Athenian Agora and Corinth are currently key points of reference for understanding monetary circulation in Late Antique and Early Byzantine Greece, due to their extensive study and documentation. However, it is important to acknowledge that those publications are incomplete and sometimes

¹⁰ In most of the cases, the destruction levels are not sealed deposits as the sites have continued to be in use.

¹¹ In the Late Roman period, the production of amphoras and tableware were marked by a notable degree of standardization. From the 6th century onwards, local production gained prominence, with much of it remaining unstudied. See: Bevan, Andrew. "Mediterranean Containerization" *Current Anthropology* 55, no. 4 (August 2014): 392-397 and Todorova, Evelina. "One Amphora, Different Contents: The Multiple Purposes of Byzantine Amphorae According to Written and Archaeological Data" in *Multidisciplinary Approaches to Food and Foodways in the Medieval Eastern Mediterranean*, Lyon: MOM Éditions, 2020 (accessed January 30, 2024: <http://books.openedition.org/momeditions/10269>). For difficulties in studying pottery after the 6th century see: Vionis, Athanasios K. "Bridging the Early Medieval 'Ceramic Gap' in the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean (7th-9th C.): Local and Global Phenomena" *Herom* 9 (2020): 291-325.

are not up to date. Moreover, those sites may not be entirely representative of their broader context.

Moreover, ancient urban centers and wealthier residences tend to be overrepresented compared to the countryside and more modest houses, where archaeological visibility is lower.¹² Sites linked to the Greco-Roman period are more thoroughly studied and widely published compared to those from the Late Roman and Byzantine eras. This historiographical bias has led to the neglect of material culture from Byzantine strata, creating an imbalance in available information.

Despite these challenges, the FLAME dataset is continually being updated and the inclusion of additional coin publications from diverse archeological contexts will significantly enhance our understanding of Late Roman and Early Byzantine numismatics.

¹² Lately, extended surveys compensate for the bias in favor the urban and wealthier context. However, coins are rarely found in surveys.