

PROCEEDINGS OF THE  
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# COINAGE AND COIN CIRCULATION IN NICOPOLIS OF EPIRUS: A PRELIMINARY REPORT

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The mint of Nicopolis of Epirus struck coins from 27 BC to AD 268, maintaining a significant continuity of production; apart from some rare series of Nero, the issues were interrupted only for a period of almost a century after the Augustan inauguration, approximately from AD 14 to 98. Two important studies have been published about this coinage in the Seventies: a fundamental catalogue of specimens from the main collections, by M. Oikonomidou, and an accurate review by C. M. Kraay.<sup>1</sup> Further investigations about mint production in the Julio-Claudian Age have also been made by the authors of *Roman Provincial Coinage*.<sup>2</sup>

The aim of this contribution is to present some new features of this Roman provincial coinage, emerging from the analysis of the coin finds evidence and from a preliminary report of the coin circulation of Nicopolis. These thoughts arise from an update of the Oikonomidou catalogue, resulting from new specimens and variants mostly coming from unpublished Italian numismatic collections, whereas the picture of the coin circulation is based on the analysis of a sample of coins found both in old and new excavations.<sup>3</sup>

The coin finds that can be considered come from different sites located inside the urban perimeter and in the northern suburban Aktian Games district: the Roman gates and walls, some of the urban necropolis, some public buildings such as the nymphaeum, the central baths, the aqueduct and the Christian basilicas, and especially the entertainment buildings, namely the gymnasium, the stadion, the theatre and the odeion.<sup>4</sup>

TABLE 1: Nicopolis coin finds

<i>Coin Finds</i>	<i>Nicopolis Coins</i>	<i>Roman Imperial Bronzes</i>	<i>Roman Imperial Denarii</i>	<i>Antoniniani Up To 268 A.D.</i>	<i>Other Roman Provincial Mints</i>	<i>Tot</i>
Urban Finds	<b>400</b>	79	22	11	28	
Epirus Extra- Urban Finds	<b>20</b>	1	1	/	/	22
Epirus Hoards	<b>424</b>	/	/	/	1	425
Total	<b>844</b>	80	23	11	29	987

Table 1 offers a complete view of Nicopolis coin finds that I was given the opportunity to

<sup>1</sup> Acknowledgements: For permission to study this material I want to express my deepest gratitude to Georgios Riginos (Director of the 33rd Ephorate of Prehistoric and Classical Antiquities - Preveza), Despina Eugenidou (Director of the Numismatic Museum of Athens) and the members of the Local Epirotan Council of Monuments.

<sup>2</sup> Oikonomidou 1975; Kraay 1976. *RPC* I, nn. 1363-77, pp. 272-74, pl. 69-70.

<sup>3</sup> This paper is an abstract of my unpublished Ph.D. thesis, *La monetazione di Nicopolis d'Epiro nel contesto storico-economico delle province greche* (University of Verona, 2009): see Calomino 2011.

<sup>4</sup> The coin finds of the Octavian Memorial Monument, the Manius Antoninus Villa, the 'Vaghenea' cisterns, the North necropolis and the Alkisonos basilica are not included, because they are planned to be studied by the respective directors of excavations.

study, including hoards and extra-site finds. A deeper analysis can be made of the number of coins found within the site, that enables us to compare the different categories of currency circulating in the town in the same chronological period. From a total of 540 coins, 400 specimens belong to the issues of the civic mint. The remaining 140 pieces consist approximately of 112 Roman imperial coins and 28 Roman provincial coins struck by other mints. Apart from the silver coins, which make up a very small part of the surviving local currency (22 denarii and 11 antoniniani of Gordian III and Gallienus), the bronze coins consist of 79 imperial and 28 provincial specimens.

These data show the striking prevalence of bronze currency for everyday local transactions, with coinage from the local mint playing a leading role, representing 74.1% of the whole assemblage; the Roman imperial coins correspond to 20.7% (of which 15% are bronzes) and the other provincial specimens to 5.2% (Fig. 1). Since Nicopolis coinage is rarely found outside Epirus,<sup>5</sup> this picture confirms the general rule of Roman provincial coin production: civic bronze currency was struck almost exclusively for the local and regional circulation.<sup>6</sup>

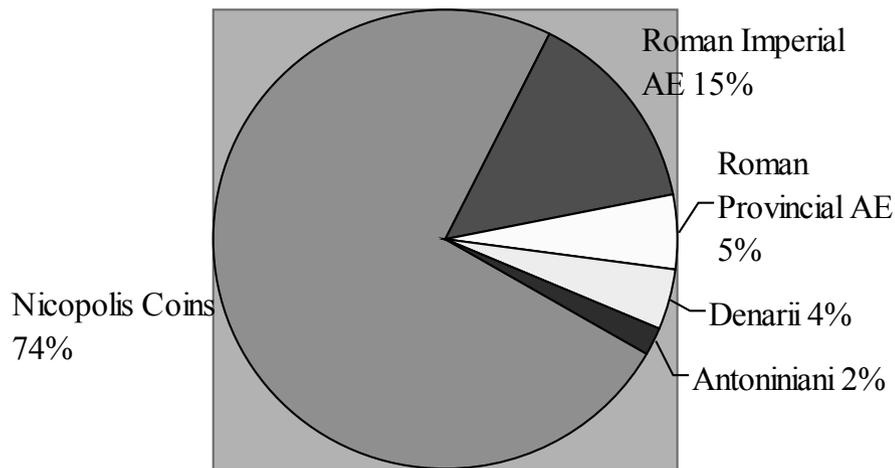


Fig. 1. Graph of the different currencies found in Nicopolis

Fig. 2 shows a chronological table of Nicopolis issues found within the ancient town. Two main peaks can be easily recognized, in the age of Trajan and Hadrian (more than 39% of the total) and in the age of Septimius Severus and Caracalla (about 28% of the total). As is also evident from the percentage of coins in the whole collection, these data confirm that the mint reached the greatest volume of production during the first half of the second century AD and the first Severan age. However, the most remarkable data refer to two different periods of extremely scarce evidence of coin finds, especially in comparison with the quantities of specimens in the main numismatic collections: both the age of Gallienus, in the final period of the mint production, and the age of Augustus, at the very beginning, are attested under 1% of the total.

<sup>5</sup> I recorded 71 specimens found within Epirus (besides Dodona, Arta and Ioannina, also in Corcyra, Leukas, Buthrotum and Phoinice), but not more than 25 in the rest of Greece (namely in Olimpia, Pagae, Kabeiros,

Corinth, Patras and Athens).

<sup>6</sup> See Burnett 1993, pp. 146-48.

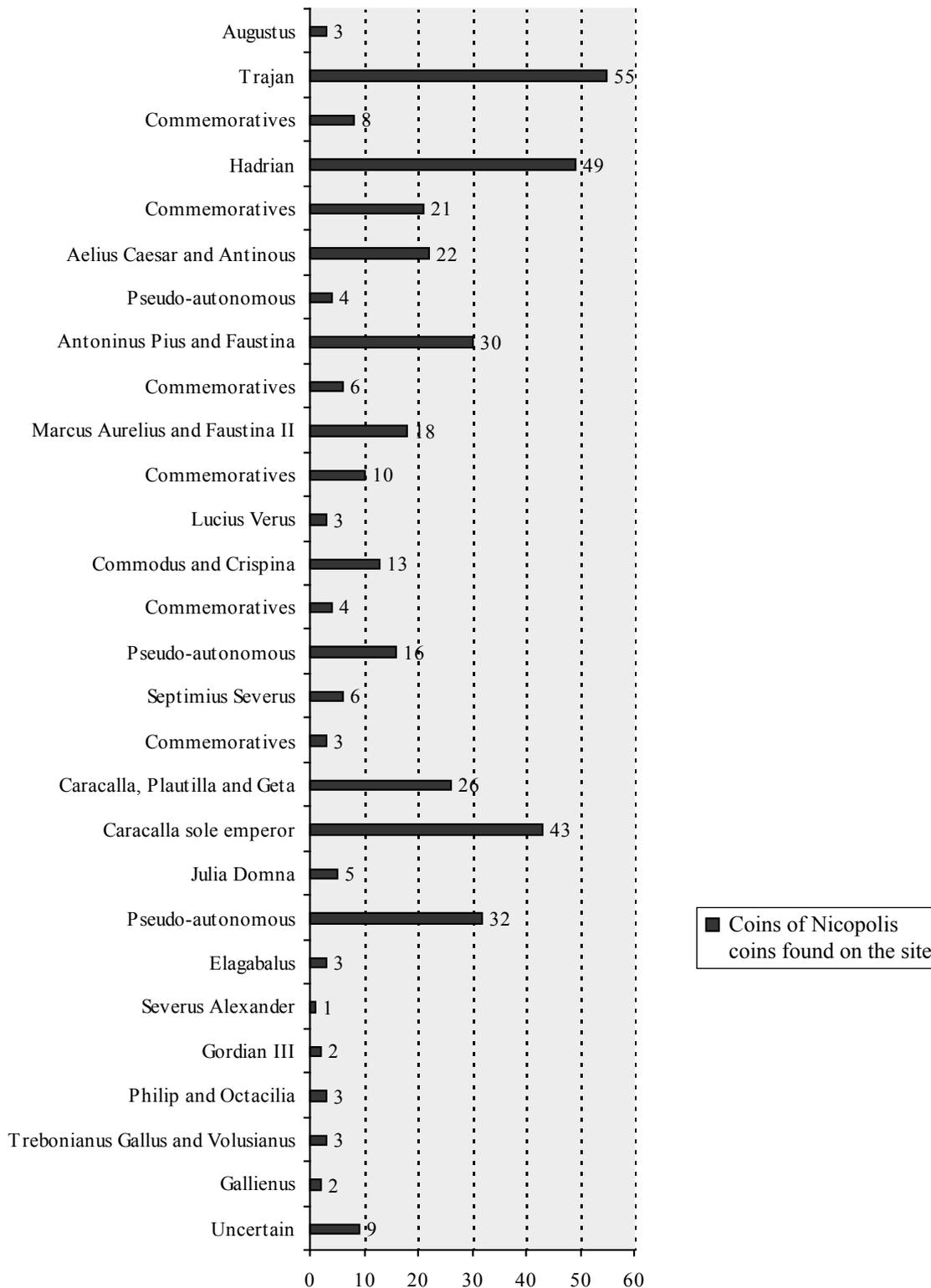


Fig. 2. Chronological table of Nicopolis coins found on the site

The rarity of Gallienus's coin finds can probably be explained by the intensive process of hoarding at the end of his reign. A unique Roman imperial coin hoard comes from Epirus, a small mixed sestertii, denarii and antoniniani treasure of Gordian III found in Anthochori (Ioannina),<sup>7</sup> while the other four hoards discovered in the region up to now consist exclusively of Nicopolis bronze coins.<sup>8</sup> The date of their concealment is quite probably AD 268, when the invasion of the Balkans by the Goths provoked a general alarm in the population and a systematic hoarding of their savings.<sup>9</sup> This process involved partly the Severan issues, the earliest coins to be concealed (being the main third-century currency still in circulation), and partly the most recent issues, especially the marked overvalued denominations minted under Gallienus as a sole emperor and Salonina. As a matter of fact, these 4 and 8 assaria issues, even if they were produced in a very short period of time, make up over 30% of the contents of the four hoards and represent the majority of the coins of Gallienus known at the present time.<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, it is far more difficult to understand the reason why there is such scanty evidence of Augustan issues among the urban coin finds. Of the total of 400 specimens coming from about ten different sites located in the ancient town, only three Augustan coins (all of the Nike-type one-assarion denomination - *RPC* 1364) have been found - one from the odeion, one from the stadium and another one of unknown provenance. This is an extremely low percentage compared to the evidence of the numismatic collections. In fact, the number of one-assarion specimens in the collections (102 attested coins at present time) is certainly more relevant, reaching more than 5% of the entire coinage produced by the mint in its history. Probably like no other Nicopolis series, at least 17 obverse dies and 19 reverse dies of the same unique Augustan issue are known up to now; moreover, since the mint stopped striking coins for almost a century after the death of Augustus, except for some rare and controversial Neronian issues,<sup>11</sup> one can probably suppose that this production was enough for the satisfaction of bronze coinage needs in the following decades.

So the issuing authorities might have decided to interrupt the coinage temporarily because there was no need for a further supply of currency, owing to the coins still in circulation from the Augustan age and probably even to the small bronze Greek currency which survived from the Republican period.<sup>12</sup> As a consequence, the very few surviving Augustan pieces look very worn and under-weight, doubtless because of a long period of circulation. On the other hand, as there is almost no evidence left of this significant production among the coin finds from the site, one should reckon that, after a long-lasting circulation, the local council could ultimately have decided to withdraw the old currency, perhaps in order to recast it and recycle the metal. This could possibly have occurred when the authorities resumed striking coins under Trajan.

Though the evidence is still too scarce, another aspect of the finds might support this hypothesis: paradoxically it may be observed that more Augustan coins, though still in very small quantities, come from outer archaeological sites than from Nicopolis itself, where the withdrawal measure might have enjoyed more efficacy; as a matter of fact, nine more specimens are known

<sup>7</sup> Touratsoglou 2006, n. 94, p. 181. This hoard is not included in Table 1, because the exact number of its specimens is not known.

<sup>8</sup> Just a single specimen of the Thessalian League is included; see Kraay 1976, p. 238.

<sup>9</sup> Three hoards have been published so far, namely the Athens-Beyrut hoard, the Plakanida hoard and an Epirotan hoard of unknown provenance: Oikonomidou 1968; Oikonomidou 1972; Oikonomidou 1975, pp. 169-78, pl. 64-71. A fourth unpublished small treasure was found in 2007 in Vathy (Preveza), where one of the Nicopolis harbours is supposed to have been

located; it contains 31 bronze coins of Nicopolis dated from Septimius Severus to Trebonianus Gallus.

<sup>10</sup> Oikonomidou 1975, pp. 157-62, 164-66, 173-76; Kraay 1976, pp. 245-47.

<sup>11</sup> See *RPC* I, pp. 273-74, with earlier bibliography.

<sup>12</sup> See the coin finds in Epirus reported by Hammond 1967, pp. 717-25, and Rodevald 1976, p. 61, note 493. On the topic of old coinage recirculation instead of new coins being supplied, see Burnett 1987, pp. 92-93 and Howgego 1990, pp. 11-15; on the survival of bronze Greek coins in Roman provincial currency, see Harl 1996, pp. 106-117.

from excavations but they all come from other sites, in the Ioannina and in the Arta District (north to the site of Nicopolis), especially from the excavations in ancient Dodona.<sup>13</sup>

Further evidence can be found in a very peculiar feature of the urban finds, this being a surprising high percentage of halved bronze coins. There are 32 of them (mostly very worn and not clearly identifiable), probably 25 Roman imperial and seven Roman provincial coins. What we can certainly state is the complete absence of intentionally broken Nicopolis bronze coins, so this phenomenon is actually attested by 30% of the whole bronze currency not minted by the city that was found on the site. Among the cut specimens almost exclusively Augustan and Julio-Claudian asses can be identified,<sup>14</sup> and among the Roman provincial halved specimens it is possible to recognize two Augustan bronzes, one from Thessalonica (*RPC I*, 1557-1561) and the other of the so-called CA Coinage of Asia (*RPC I*, 1138-1144), and a Claudian coin of Patras (*RPC I*, 1256). Overall one can state that the halved bronze coins of the site belong mostly to the first half of the first century AD.

Referring to the fundamental study by T. Buttrey about the use of halved bronze coins in the Roman world, these coins can definitely be assigned to the second category of his classification, the halved Tiberian age asses reutilized as a small denomination for everyday use; these coins were cut because of the need for a supply of bronze fractions along the northern border of the river Rhein, forcing the authorities to resume striking semisses under Nero.<sup>15</sup> A similar situation could have occurred in Nicopolis, in confirmation of the monetary picture that has been so far delineated. At the end of the Julio-Claudian age the old Augustan assaria were very worn and began to become scarce, and the lower denominations were too few to satisfy the need for local currency. This could have led people to cut bronze coins to produce new smaller denomination pieces using exclusively non-urban issues, which one could call the 'foreign' currency. Alternatively, it could also be suggested that these halved coins came to Greece from the Transalpine regions and from Italy, where they had previously been halved,<sup>16</sup> but the first explanation still seems the most likely. In fact, the coin finds of Nicopolis show quite a local and circumscribed phenomenon, related to a particular monetary situation rather than to external factors that would have involved other sites as well.<sup>17</sup> Though our knowledge of coin circulation in Roman Greece is far from complete, there is no comparable percentage of cut specimens among Roman provincial coin find inventories so far published.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, in the excavations of the Roman colony of Buthrotum, another representative Epirotan case study, a completely different situation is presented, since only very few halved specimens have been recovered in a much more abundant sample of coins.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, I am aware that the peculiarity of the Nicopolis case is based on a significant, but still not completely representative, sample of evidence; only further coin finds could confirm or deny this interpretation.

Therefore one may suggest that in Nicopolis there could have been a particular shortage of bronze currency during the late Julio-Claudian and Flavian periods, when the mint had ceased to

<sup>13</sup> Two coins come from Megalo Gardiki (Ioannina), nn. 28-29; I am deeply grateful to Georgia Pliakou for giving me this information taken from her unpublished Ph.D. thesis (University of Thessaloniki). Three more unpublished specimens are in the collections in the Archaeological Museums of Arta and Ioannina. On the other Augustan coins found in Dodona and in Arta, see Oikonomidou 1975, pp. 68-69, nn. 10γ, 26δ, 27στ, 32.

<sup>14</sup> It is possible to identify asses by Tiberius (*RIC* 81), by Caligula (*RIC* 58) and by Claudius.

<sup>15</sup> Buttrey 1972, pp. 42-47.

<sup>16</sup> I am very grateful to John Casey for suggesting to me this alternative interpretation.

<sup>17</sup> Besides, the cut Roman provincial specimens found in Nicopolis must necessarily come from Greece and the East, not from the Rhein border.

<sup>18</sup> Some cases of cut bronze provincial coins in the East were reported in Leonard 1993, pp. 364-70. It is also worth mentioning the interesting case of a single broken specimen included in a Roman provincial hoard of Dium (Macedonia); just a fragment or a cut coin? See Kremydi-Sicilianou 2004, p. 121, n. 1566.

<sup>19</sup> For this precious information I warmly thank Richard Abdy and Sam Moorhead, who are studying and publishing the whole numismatic material found in Buthrotum on behalf of the British Museum and the Butrint Foundation.

produce and the local authorities were not allowed to resume the production, since Vespasian and his sons had revoked the right to strike coins to all the mints of Achaëa.<sup>20</sup> A considerable shortage both of the assaria and of their fractions (the dolphin-on-trident type coins of Agrippa - *RPC* 1367, that were produced in extremely small quantities under Augustus) is the reason why the second half of the first century AD could have been a period of frequent halving of bronze coins, after the 'foreign' Julio-Claudian coinage had first arrived, probably with some delay after being issued in Rome or in other parts of Roman Greece. Being forced to reuse the same old Augustan assaria, but needing further supplies of bronze fractions, people in Nicopolis used to break in half only coins of other mints and to spend them for everyday transactions.

If this interpretation is correct, these data could also offer a further contribution to the remarkable topic of civic coinage and local identity in the provinces of the Empire, which has been fully discussed by scholars in recent years.<sup>21</sup> In this context, Burnett's hypothesis could fit the Nicopolis coin finds situation: he pointed out that in the eastern part of the empire some inscriptions both on stone and on coinage refer to western Roman denominations as if they were products of a foreign power. This could be just one of the features that testify how prestige and civic pride had a greater symbolic power for the eastern mints of the Empire than for those of the western side, which stopped striking coins soon after Claudius because they preferred to use the Roman imperial currency as a mean of self-integration in the imperial élites (rather than producing their own coins).<sup>22</sup> In the Nicopolis community a similar claim to cultural identity could lead people to 'preserve' the local coinage and cut only the coins that could be considered as 'foreign currency', namely those minted by other Roman imperial and provincial mints, in order to adapt them to the local monetary system.

Probably in consequence of this use, and after withdrawing the old Augustan bronzes, not only did the authorities decide to resume striking coins under Trajan, but they also substantially changed the local monetary system to accord with people's real needs. Under Trajan and Hadrian, the very rare larger denominations almost disappeared, while the production of both the middle and, above all, the smaller denomination increased significantly,<sup>23</sup> probably allowing a solution to the problem of the lack of submultiples in circulation. As a consequence, we find no more halved bronze coins after the Flavian period.

As was illustrated in the graph, the Trajanic-Hadrianic age is one of the best attested coin finds phases; this is also due to the remarkable presence of the Augustan posthumous issues - commemorative series bearing the head of Augustus instead of the portrait of the reigning emperor, celebrating the city founder with the legends ΚΤΙΣΜΑ ΣΕΒΑΣΤΟΥ or ΚΤΙΣΤΗΣ ΑΥΓΟΥΣΤΟΣ.<sup>24</sup> If our assumption is correct, the risk of the withdrawal of the old coinage of the founder Augustus being seen almost as a *damnatio memoriae* decree could have been avoided through a clear ideological message of the preservation of his memory. Furthermore, his own name had already been undeservedly outraged by the coinage of Nero, who had refounded and renamed the town with the new legend ΝΕΡΩΝΟΝΙΚΟΠΟΛΙΣ (*RPC* 1368-1371), embezzling the authentic founder's title. This could justify the decision of restoring the Augustan memory, remembering the portrait and the title-name of the city founder through an almost uninterrupted sequence of issues, until the reign of Gallienus.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>20</sup> *RPC* I, p. 21; *RPC* II, pp. 1, 70.

<sup>21</sup> See the cases discussed in Howgego / Heuchert / Burnett (eds.) 2005.

<sup>22</sup> Burnett 2005, pp. 173-78.

<sup>23</sup> Oikonomidou 1975, pp. 78-90.

<sup>24</sup> Kraay 1976, pp. 239-44.

<sup>25</sup> Kraay 1976, p. 244.

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