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Aleksander Bursche (abursche@yahoo.com)

Relations between the Late Roman World and Barbarian Europe in the Light of Coin Finds

Introduction

The area considered in the present contribution is East Central and Northern (Scandinavia) Europe, settled by peoples referred to in the written sources as *superiores barbari*. As such we leave out from the discussion the zone directly bordering on the Roman Empire settled by *proximi ripae*. Roman contacts with these two zones of the barbarian world were essentially different. This is reflected both by historical accounts and by the differences in archaeological evidence, including coin finds (Wolters 1988, Kehne 1989, Berger 1992, 1996, Erdrich 2001).

Mass influx of coinage to the area of interest started relatively late, ie, during the second half of AD 2nd century, more exactly, during the Marcomman Wars. This dating is indicated by oldest hoards, which barring a few exceptions, are closed – at the earliest – by issues from the times of Marcus Aurelius, and by archaeological context of coin finds in graves or bog deposits, where they may be dated in principle, at the earliest, to the second half or even last quarter of AD 2nd century (Nielsen 1992; Berger 1992, 122-160; Bursche 2002; 2003a; Bemmann 2005). And so, during a period of well developed exchange between the Roman Empire and the Barbaricum, coinciding with the Golden Age and the House of Antonine, Roman coins started to flow more intensively in the reign of the last two Antonine emperors.

Roman coins reached the Barbaricum in larger number, with some interruption and widely fluctuating intensity, until the period of the late Constantine emperors and subsequently, in a very limited quantity, except for the episode of the second half of the 5th and early 6th century when a large number of solidi made their appearance in the Baltic Basin (Bolin 1929; Bursche 1989; 1996a; 1996b, 36-38; Berger 1992; 1996).

Throughout this entire period the influx of coinage was far from uniform, both as regards the types of issues, chronology and geographic range. Influx of a specific category of coins to a given areas during a specific period may be interpreted as resulting from different forms of Roman-Barbarian interchange (Bursche 1989; 1996a). These are outlined below in

chronological order under headings of denominations most frequently encountered in Barbaricum during a given period.

1. 2nd century denarii

Over most of the area of Central and East Central Europe and in the Baltic islands the antique coins most frequently encountered both in hoards and as stray finds are denarii of the Antonine dynasty (Bolin 1929, 98-107; Lind 1981; 1988; 1991; Kromann 1989; 1990; Berger 1992, 122-146; Bursche 1997b; 2002). They reached the region in large numbers, as shown by detailed chronological analysis, within a relatively short time interval of around twenty-five years, starting from Marcus Aurelius, until the first years of the reign of Septimius Severus. Contrary to earlier hypotheses which linked the coinage to trade exchange (Bolin 1929, 128-141) according to more recent assumptions denarii poured to the more remote barbarian zone as a result of political circumstances: as tribute, ransom or contribution paid to barbarian tribes, *superiores barbari* in particular, residing at a greater distance from the Empire. Such payments were supposed to ensure peace on the Danubian limes, in a situation of direct threat of invasion from the North. After reforms in the early reign of Septimius Severus which led to political stability and strengthening of the limes these payments were discontinued (Berger 1992, 156-160; 1996; Bursche 1994; 1996a, 123-125; 2002; 2003a; Lucchelli 1998a; 1998b; Wolters 1999, 381-390). In the first half of the 3rd century, gradually devaluated silver coinage penetrated into the Barbarian hinterland in relatively insignificant number (Berger 1992, 161-164; Bursche 1996a). Some of their number reached farther north from the limes, as evidenced by a relatively large number of finds of *subaerati* struck on the limes under Severian emperors (Bursche 1997a; 1997b).

2. 2nd and 3rd century sestertii

An extremely interesting phenomenon, noted on the scale of the entire Barbaricum, is the inflow to the southern Baltic coastal region, and especially, West Balt territory (Mazury, Sambian Peninsula and western Lithuania) of a very large number of senatorial bronzes, first of all, sestertii of the Antonine emperors and, what is especially interesting, issues struck in the first half of the 3rd century, as far as Valerianus (Bolin 1929, 107-108; Bursche 1992; Michelbertas 1995; 2001; Nowakowski 2001). Chronological sequences of hoards and grave assemblages in which they occur, show that the sestertii penetrated to the area successively over eighty years, from the times of Marcus Aurelius until around AD 250. The region of occurrence of a smaller number of sestertii struck after the decline of the Antonine dynasty is limited within the area of the Roman Empire to Italy, particularly its northern region. It would seem that these impressive, large and shining golden coins were valued as an equivalent traded for amber and flowed directly from the plains on the Po River and area around

Aquileia to the southern Baltic, ie. area of the richest amber deposits (Bursche 1992; 1996a, 125-127).

3. Greek Imperials

The region of SE and East Central Europe, settled in late antiquity mainly by Gothic tribes, is particularly rich in finds of 3rd century Greek Imperials or more broadly understood coinage from autonomous emissions, including especially Viminacium but also Asian issues. There is little doubt that presence of this coinage in Barbaricum should be linked to population movement. Some of the Greek imperials may be the result of wide-ranging Gothic incursions during the crisis of the 3rd century, others presumably represent a part of army pay issued to Germanic troops for service in Roman auxiliary units (Bursche 1983; 1986; 1992).

4. Alexandrian tetradrachms

Among coins flowing to Central Europe an interesting group are Alexandrian tetradrachms, particularly, issues struck during the final period of this independent mint, ie, during the last quarter of the 3rd century. Finds of this coinage are relatively numerous in areas bordering on the limes, to which area they presumably were carried by troops on the move from where they may have subsequently trickled away deeper into Barbaricum. It cannot be ruled out however that tetradrachms were also a part of payment for Barbarian service in auxiliary units. Their presence in Alexandria is confirmed e.g. during the reign of Diocletian (Bursche 1986; Jančo 2002; Militký 2005; Bursche, Czarnecka 2006).

5. Antoniniani

From the times of Gordian III, and especially during the second half the 3rd century in the area of Barbaricum one notes relatively numerous Antoniniani, some of them forming part of larger deposits. Influx of this extremely devaluated silver coinage testifies to diverse contacts of political nature. Presumably, antoniniani were paid by the Romans as part of contributions, annual payments or army pay, in special cases, also for redeeming hostages (Berger 1992, 161-170; Bursche 1996a; 127-129).

6. Aurei

In the latter half of the 3rd century the area of Central and East Central Europe was reached by a relatively large number of aurei and the first gold medallions. A part of this coinage was issued by rulers of *Imperium Galliarum* and was recorded in sumptuous graves belonging to representatives of the Germanic power elite. Aurei may represent remuneration offered to *reguli* or leaders of troops which during internal struggle within the Empire sided with usurper only to shift their support to the legal emperor (Berger 1992, 161-170; Bursche 1996a, 127-129).

7. Ae of Constantine dynasty

In areas of south Poland inhabited during the 4th century by Vandal tribes, then enjoying the height of economic prosperity, the archaeological record includes a large percentage of bronze issues of the House of Constantine. Presumably this coinage reached the area of interest as a result of exchange with Romans during a period of economic stability, although it is less easy to specify what goods were traded with the North (Bursche 1996a, 129-131).

8. 4th century siliquae

A relatively strong stream of siliquae found its way during the reign of Constantius II to the area of Moldova and SW Ukraine, from which area the coinage penetrated NW through east Poland as far as Fyn. Presumably these finds may be traced to *donativa* issued to leaders of Gothic *foederati* in exchange for their service on the side of Rome (Zedelius 1974; Kromann 1989; 1990; 1994; Berger 1992, 199; Bursche 1996a, 132).

9. 4th century solidi and medallions

In areas of north Europe (Lower Saxony and Westphalia), and in particular, Denmark and south Poland, north Ukraine and the Transylvania, a relatively large group of solidi is noted (occasionally, with earlier aurei and their imitations) and large gold medallions of Constantine and Valentinian emperors, including also numerous coins of the usurper Magnentius. Most frequently they occur in larger deposits. Gold coins, presumably similar to the *siliquae*, were given by *comes sacrarum largitionum* as *donativa* to leaders of Germanic *foederati* (Kromann 1989; 1990; 1994; Berger 1992, 171-187; Bursche 1996a, 131-132; 2003b). Medallions, on the other hand, found their way into the hands of particularly deserving representatives of Germanic elites (Bursche 2000).

10. 5th and early 6th century solidi

In Pomerania and the Baltic islands, including Gotland, Oland and Bornholm, in the second half of the 5th century a substantial inflow is registered of gold coinage. The presence among these finds of Ostrogothic imitations is linked with tributes, confirmed by written sources, paid out by Romans to Ostrogoths who during this time were residing in Pannonia. From this area, perhaps carried by barbarians on their way back to their original abodes 5th century solidi found their way to the region on the Baltic sea. Their influx largely came to a standstill during the reign of Anastasius I, although an insignificant number is noted, especially in Gotland, dating from the times of Justinian (Fagerlie 1967; Östergen 1981; Kyhlberg 1986; Ciołek 2003).

Conclusions

Coinage, gold and silver issues in particular, reaching areas of Central and North Europe testify to the activity of Roman diplomacy, many-faceted political relations

maintained by the Empire and Barbaricum, particularly intensive during the late Roman period. In trade exchange the primary medium was bronze coinage which registers a peak in the archaeological record in Barbaricum during the period from the end of the 2nd until the middle of the 3rd century. The final discontinuation of the influx of Roman coinage to the area of interest during the reign of Justinian should be linked to the decline of late antique Barbarian societies and gradual immigration to the region from the SE of Slavs.

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