

THE END OF THE LOWER DANUBIAN *LIMES*: A VIOLENT OR A  
PEACEFUL PROCESS ?

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**Résumé.** *Si on considère que la fin du limes signifiait l'abandon des cites par l'armée Byzantine, nous acceptons que ce processus était violent, mais seulement avant 598. L'abandon de ces cites danubiennes n'a pas été le résultat des autres invasions, mais un cas particulier dans le processus general du decline économique de l'Empire Byzantin.*

**Abstract.** *If we consider that the end of the limes signified the abandonment of the fortresses by the Byzantine army, then we should agree that this process was violent, but only before 598. The extinction of these Danubian cities was not the result of other invasions, but a particular case in the general process of economic decline of the Byzantine state.*

**Rezumat.** *Dacă von considera că sfârșitul limes-ului a semnificat abandonarea cetăților de către armata bizantină, atunci trebuie să admitem că acest proces a fost unul violent, dar numai până la 598. Părăsirea orașelor dunărene nu a fost rezultatul altor invazii, ci un caz particular în cadrul procesului general de declin economic al statului bizantin.*

For a long time, historians considered that the year 602 had a major significance for the end of the Byzantine domination over the Danubian area. Recent studies denied this viewpoint, emphasizing that Phokas continued the 6<sup>th</sup> century policy patterns and that the great change, the turning point between Antiquity and Middle Ages, should be dated during the reign of Heraklios (LILIE 1985, 17-23; OLSTER 1993a, 67-80, 183-185). The downfall of the Danubian frontier was not the result of the rebellion of 602, but a consequence of a lot of events which affected in different ways, in different times, and in different places the control of the Late Roman army over the region between the Danube and the northern Balkan mountain range, from the Iron Gates to the Danube Delta, during a period started in the last part of the reign of Justin II and lasted in the first years of Heraklios (MADGEARU 1997, 315-336; COMȘA 1987, 223-223).

The chronology of this process can be established by the comparison of the written sources with the numismatic evidence. The isolated coin finds provide more accurate data than the treasures, because these random lost coins reflect a statistical sample of the real

coin circulation (METCALF 1991, 142), while the hiding of hoards does not always indicate barbarian inroads and destruction levels (CURTA 2001, 169-175). The statistics is applied only to the coins with known value, because it is more significant to count the value of the coins than their number.

The first period of the downfall process can be dated between 577-587 (POHL 1988, 70-88, WHITBY 1988, 138-151; MADGEARU 1997, 316-319; CURTA 2001, 90-99). Not only the hiding of many hoards, closed with coins issued in 576-582, found along the *limes* and inside the provinces Moesia Prima, Dacia Ripensis, Moesia Secunda, and Scythia (JURUKOVA 1968, 137-137; POPOVIĆ 1975, 467-468; JOVANOVIĆ, KORAC 1984, 195; JOVANOVIĆ, KORAC, JANKOVIĆ 1986, 382; POENARU-BORDEA, OCHEȘEANU 1983-1985, 177-185; C. OPAIȚ 1991, 478-481; MILCEV, DRAGANOV 1992, 39, 41)<sup>1</sup> testifies the intensity of the Avar and Slavic attacks, but – more significant - the stray coin finds collected from Scythia are showing a down trend between 575 and 586 (MADGEARU 1997, 335, fig. 5) (See Figure 1). The statistics fits very well with the literary evidence, but unfortunately can not be applied for the Bulgarian and Serbian sectors of the *limes* because there are few accurately data. The Avar offensives from 584 and 586 were directed toward the entire Lower Danubian *limes*. After the conquest of Sirmium (582), Baian started two campaigns against the main Danubian frontier cities (Singidunum, Viminacium, Augusta, Aquae, Bononia, Ratiaria, Durostorum), and against some towns far from the *limes*, like Anchialos (Theoph. Sim., *Hist.*, I.4, I.8.). The strategic plan of the Avar ruler was to destroy the Byzantine defence along the entire Lower Danubian frontier, from the Iron Gates to Durostorum and to forbid the advance of the Byzantine army through the Iron Gates toward the Avar power center from Pannonia (WHITBY 1988, 172; POPOVIĆ 1975, 472-473) (See Figure 2). The fortresses around the Iron Gates were affected, but some of them like Slatinska Reka, Prahovo, and perhaps Drobeta were restored between 587-592, because the Byzantine commanders realized too their value<sup>2</sup>.

The second period of the downfall, dated between 593-602 (POHL

<sup>1</sup> Tekija (*Transdierna*), Slatinska Reka, Koprivetz, Galata, Baniska, Bjala Reka, Goliama Koutlovitza, *Axiopolis*, Murighiol (*Halmyris*), Veliko Orašje, Veliko Gradište (*Pincum*), Boljetin (*Smorna*).

<sup>2</sup> Reconstructions are attested at Slatinska Reka and Prahovo: JOVNOVIĆ, KORAC 1984, 195-196; JOVANOVIĆ, KORAC, JANKOVIĆ 1986, 383; JANKOVIĆ 1981, 213-214. For Drobeta, the revival of the coin penetration after 588 could testify this restoration. See OBERLÄNDER-TÄRNOVEANU 2001, 44-45, 48.

1988, 128-147, 152-155; WHITBY 1988, 156-164; MADGEARU 1997, 320-322; CURTA 2001, 100-106), was the result of the Avar offensives directed against the *limes* and the interior of the Balkan provinces. In the same time continued the Slavic invasions started from present-day Romania. Their homeland was attacked by the Byzantine army, but with minor results. The most important consequence of the Avar inroads from 593-598 was the destruction of the fortresses located near the Iron Gates. In most cases, the last issued coins are dated up to 596 (POPOVIĆ 1975, 476-486; JANKOVIĆ 1981, 214; MINIĆ 1984, 39-47; KONDIĆ 1984, 51-54; OBERLÄNDER-TÂRNOVEANU 2001, 48-49)<sup>3</sup> (See Figure 3). Although the Byzantine army defeated the Avars in 596 at Singidunum and into another North-Danubian offensive led west of the Iron Gates in 599, the defensive system around the Iron Gates was lost forever. The bridgehead of Sucidava-Celei (in Oltenia) was also destroyed around 598 (a coin from 596/597 was discovered in the burned level) (TUDOR 1978, 466; TOROPU, TĂTULEA 1987, 177; OBERLÄNDER-TÂRNOVEANU 2001, 45-46), but the opposite town of Novae resisted and remained an operation base for the Byzantine army until 602 or even until the departure of the army in 604<sup>4</sup>.

The sector of the *limes* between the Iron Gates and Ratiaria or even Oescus was the most affected and it seems that the Avars extended here their domination between 593-598. This control established over the river stream between Singidunum and Ratiaria or Oescus (which meant the abandonment of the fortification system around the Iron Gates and of the Sucidava bridgehead) has left without defence three major crossing points: the Iron Gates, and the fords from Bononia and Sucidava-Oescus. In this way, the invaders were able to march toward Thessaloniki and Constantinople by three Roman military roads (by Morava, Timok and Isker valleys). Another ford was took under control by the barbarian invaders after the destruction of the other Sucidava, located in Dobrudja (Izvoarele, Constanța County). The most recent coin found there was issued in 584-585 (MITREA 1966, 414, nr. 61). The Moesian Sucidava was built for the defence of one of the most important crossing points over the Danube, intensively used during the 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries for the trade with the barbarians (DIACONU 1975, 87-93; CULICĂ 1975, 215-262; CULICĂ 1976, 115-133).

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<sup>3</sup> Among them, the forts from Boljetin, Bosman, Veliki Gradac, Hajdučka Vodenica, Karatas, Slatinska Reka, Drobeta-Turnu Severin.

<sup>4</sup> Theoph. Sim., VIII.4.3-8: Comentiolus departed from Novae to Constantinople in the winter 599/600.

Because the Byzantine army had lost the control over several crossing points, the defensive system on the Danube was critically damaged, and we can consider that the *limes* was thus partially destroyed in 598, even if the Avars agreed by the peace treaty closed in 598 that the Danube will be the frontier between them and the Byzantine empire (Theoph. Sim., VII. 15. 12-14). Indeed, the mapping of the last coins found in fortresses shows that only the eastern part of the *limes* survived after 598 (See Figures 4 and 5). The rebellion of 602 caused the destruction of some fortresses. Burned levels that could be dated around 602 are attested at Iatrus (HERRMANN 1979, 14; BÜLOW 1995, 66) and Sacidava (SCORPAN 1980, 66, 74) (both continued to be peopled after these destructions).

Almost all the sites with final coins dated after 598 are located in Dobrudja. Besides, after 602, excluding Dobrudja, only at Novae the coin circulation continued until 612 (DIMITROV 1995, 704; DIMITROV 1998, 111, nr. 178). It is true that two coins issued in 612/613 and 613/614 were found at Drobeta (OBERLÄNDER-TÂRNOVEANU 2001, 53), but there is a long gap between them and the previous coin from 598/599. A military occupation at Drobeta until 614 seems unlikely. We suppose that the site remained a civilian settlement, which kept some contacts with the South-Danubian area, as like as other settlements from western Wallachia, where coins from Phokas and Heraklios were found (OBERLÄNDER-TÂRNOVEANU 2001, 53-54).

In these difficult circumstances, several frontier fortresses were abandoned, but other continued to be peopled. There are two kind of post-destruction life. In some cases, the military function survived, while other settlements lost their defensive system. The best known site that preserved a military function is Capidava. This medium sized fortress was plundered during the first wave of the Avar and Slavic invasions (576-587). Sometime after this event, in the southwestern corner was built a smaller fortress, with earthen walls, that became the new stronghold. The revival of the coin currency at Capidava around 588 could be related with this restoration. This small fortress continued to be used for a certain time during the 7<sup>th</sup> century, like the rest of the fort, where the former civilian settlement was moved (COVACEF 1988-1989, 191-195, OPRIŞ 1994, 12-13; OPRIŞ 2001, 53-55). The most recent coin found at Capidava was issued in 607/608 (VERTAN, CUSTUREA 1988-1989, 380, nr. 1306). No other fire was identified during the 7<sup>th</sup> century.

Another significant case is Halmyris (Murighiol, Tulcea County). Here, the last destruction can be dated somewhere between 577 and 587,

most probably in the first part of this interval. A general burning stratum closed the 11<sup>th</sup> level of the fortress. Two coin hoards with the final pieces from 574/575 and 576/577 were hidden in these circumstances. However, the fortress survived. Two more not burned levels were identified (end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century and the first decades of the 7<sup>th</sup> century). Because the latest coin found at Halmyris was struck in 612/613, it is certain that life continued at least until the second decade of the 7<sup>th</sup> century. However, the military function of Halmyris was severely diminished. The western gate (the main one) was not repaired after the last destruction. The rubbish was left inside and the oval space between the entries was transformed into a dwelling area used in the last two levels. A hut and three fireplaces were found there. Moreover, a part of the precinct remained dismantled (other huts were set over the wall). The first post-destruction level preserved urban features, but in the last level the settlement became a ruralized site that had slowly disappeared during the 7<sup>th</sup> century (ZAHARIADE, SUCEVEANU, A. OPAIȚ, C. OPAIȚ, TOPOLEANU 1987, 104; ZAHARIADE 1991, 316; ZAHARIADE, TOPOLEANU, MADGEARU, DVORSKI 1996, 80; MADGEARU 2001, 209, 211).

These two fortresses illustrate the two ways of survival: Capidava remained a well-defended site, while Halmyris lost a part of its defensive function. However, there is a common feature: the end of both settlements was not the result of another siege or fire. Both were gradually abandoned by their inhabitants, during a period which can not be precisely dated, but which belongs to the 7<sup>th</sup> century.

The post-destruction levels are also attested in other frontier fortified settlements, like Iatrus (BÜLOW 1995, 55-56), Sacidava (SCORPAN 1980, 70, 74), Beroe (AL. BARNEA, VASILIU, IACOB, PARASCHIV 2000, 72-73), as well as in some interior towns like Tropaeum (PAPUC 1977, 357-360; BOGDAN-CĂTĂNICIU 1979, 175-189; BOGDAN-CĂTĂNICIU, POENARU-BORDEA 1996-1997, 85-95) and Histria (PETRE 1963, 317-334; SUCEVEANU, SCORPAN 1971, 158-160; DOMĂNEANȚU, SION 1982, 377-394; SUCEVEANU, AVRAM, BOUNEGRU 1999, 54-56; SUCEVEANU, MUȘEȚEANU, MILOŠEVIĆ 2001, 113-118).

They evolved into ruralized settlements, with or without a military function. In some cases, the inhabitants continued to defend them, as they did even when an organized *limes* still existed (for instance at Asamum, where the citizens organized their own *militia*) (Theoph. Sim., VII.3; WOZNIAK 1982, 204; SCHREINER 1986, 28-29; GREGORY 1992, 251-252). The life of these fortresses came to an end not because the barbarian attacks, but by a gradual extinction. Of course, in other cases the last

destruction was not followed by a new period of occupation (for instance: Ratiaria, Sucidava from Dobrudja, Troesmis, Dinogetia).

The real cause of the death of the fortified settlements that composed the *limes* was the general economic decline that affected almost all the peripheral provinces in the second half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century and especially after the ninth decade. The same trend was observed in places not affected by invasions. For instance, the researches made at Anemurion in Asia Minor have shown an economic stagnation and a demographic decline after 580 into a city that was prosperous before (RUSSEL 1986, 144-149; RUSSEL 2002, 222). In the Danubian area, the decline of the trading relations and the withdrawal of the army compelled the towns people to change their way of life and to find other means of subsistence in the countryside.

The reason why the destructions dated between 577-587 and 593-602 were not followed by other such events on the *limes* at the beginning of the 7<sup>th</sup> century was the peace closed between the Byzantine Empire and the Avars in 604, when Phokas has accepted to pay a huge tribute. The Byzantine troops were withdrawn from the Danube in order to support the Persian war (Theophanes Confessor, *Chronographia*, ed. De Boor, 292; LILIE 1985, 18; POHL 1988, 238; OLSTER 1993a, 82; WHITTOW 1996, 74; TREADGOLD 1997, 238). In these circumstances, the peace was restored on the Lower Danube after 604. The local garrisons (if still existed) were not more a danger for the Avars, because what remained from the *limes* ceased to exist as an organized frontier defended by the imperial army after 604 (not after 602 !). The Byzantine army was not more involved in the defence of the Danube.

The recovery of the coin circulation between 603-607 could be the result of the peace closed with the Avars in 604. The retreat of the army did not affect the level of the coin circulation (See Figure 6). On the contrary, the high tendency shows that the circulation was much more influenced by the recovery of the trade in the new peaceful conditions than by the presence of the soldiers on the frontier. The cities located on the seashore (Tomis, Callatis, Odessos) or near the Danube Delta (Halmyris, Argamum) preserved their better economic situation, because the maritime contacts were not affected by the barbarian inroads.

The next fall of the coin circulation began in 608/609, in the same time with a very harsh winter (608/609), when even the sea had frozen. The consequence was the starvation (Theophanes Confessor, *Chronographia*, ed. De Boor, 297; STRATOS 1968, 78; HERRIN 1989,

190)<sup>5</sup>, which possibly can be seen as the impelling force of the Slavic invasion recorded by *Miracula Sancti Demetrii*, l. 12 in 609 (POPOVIĆ 1975, 451; LEMERLE 1981, 72-73). The rebellion of Heraklios, which was more critical for the empire than the rebellion of Phokas, started in the same circumstances. The evolution of the coin circulation reflects this crisis. Yet, a short recovery can be observed in 613-614 (more clearly if we take into account the coins from the hoards – see Figure 7). The recovery occurred just before the great invasions of 614-619, when several important towns that could provide a large booty were destroyed or besieged by the Avars and Slavs (among them, Justiniana Prima, Naissus, Serdica, Thessaloniki) (POPOVIĆ 1975, 489-497). It seems that the invaders were not more concerned with the small frontier settlements, because these were already abandoned by the imperial army. There are no proofs in Dobrudja for destructions dated around 614, on the Danube or in the inner cities like Tomis, Tropaeum, Histria, and Argamum, with the possible exception of Sacidava (SCORPAN 1980, 66, 70, 74, 129). However, the chronology sustained by the author of the excavations made at Sacidava was rejected and we can not be sure that the coin issued in 613 belonged to the level that suffered the last fire, or to the post-destruction level (LILIE 1985, 17-23; OLSTER 1993a, 67-80, 183-185).

The life in some of the settlements that were once the elements of the *limes* continued for a certain time into the 7<sup>th</sup> century. A coin issued in 629/630 found at Hârşova (Carsium) (CUSTUREA 1986, 277, nr. 6) shows how long the settlements survived and how long they kept contacts with the Byzantine Empire. Moreover, the great city of Durostorum has survived without any interruption until the present.

For strategic reasons, the Danube downstream of Durostorum remained under the control of the Byzantine navy at least until 680. This subject can not be developed here, but we should observe that a lead seal of the emperor Constantine IV dated between 679-685 was found at Durostorum (I. BARNEA, 1981, 625-628; I. BARNEA 1985, 306). Most probably, the seal belonged to a letter addressed to a military commander, during the war against the Bulgarians (680), when the navy advanced on the Danube. This control required the existence of some points for landing and supply, which can be located, for instance, at Noviodunum, Carsium, Capidava, and, of course, Durostorum. These points were no longer a *limes*, but their inhabitants were able to defend themselves and to help the

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<sup>5</sup> The primary source of Theophanes was *Chronicon ad annum 724 pertinens* (transl. E. W. Brooks), Paris, 1904, 113. See OLSTER 1993b, 224.

landing of the Byzantine ships. We recall that forms of local defence were evolving even in the period when the *limes* still existed. The Danube remained *de iure* the northern frontier of the empire, possibly defended by some tribes of Slavic *foederati* (CHRYSOS 1987, 38).

The naval control over the Danube and the *pakta* with some Slavic chiefs were the two sides of the defence system that replaced the old *limes* until the settlement of the Bulgarians in 680 - the event that changed for three centuries the geopolitical configuration of the Balkan region.

If we consider that the end of the *limes* signified the abandonment of the fortresses by the Byzantine army, then we should agree that this process was violent, but only before 598. However, some fortresses survived after 598 and even after the withdraw of the imperial troops. The extinction of these Danubian cities was not the result of other invasions, but a particular case in the general process of economic decline of the Byzantine state. It was a peaceful and slow transition from 'town-life' to 'life-in-town', and then toward a complete ruralization of the Danubian area. In this way, for some Lower Danubian forts, the end came into a peaceful way.

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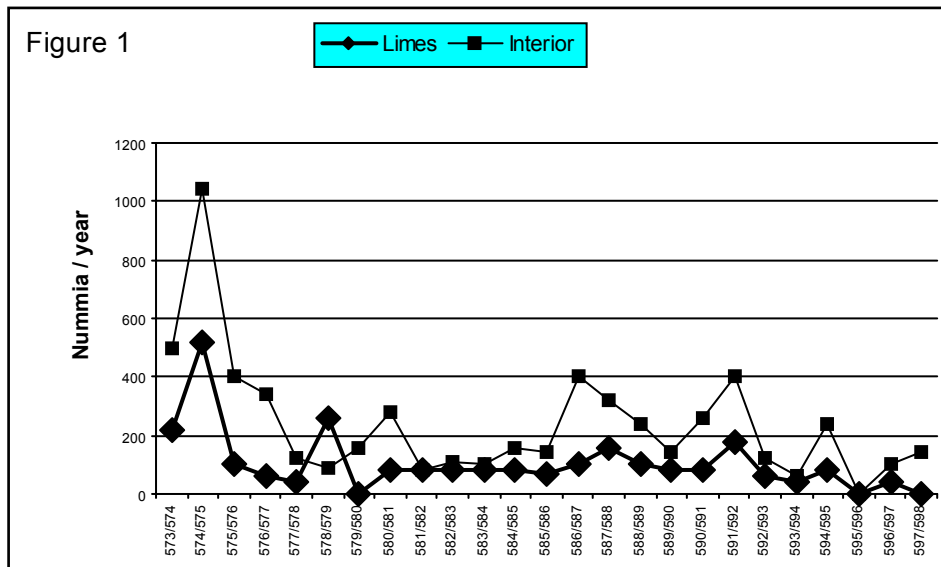
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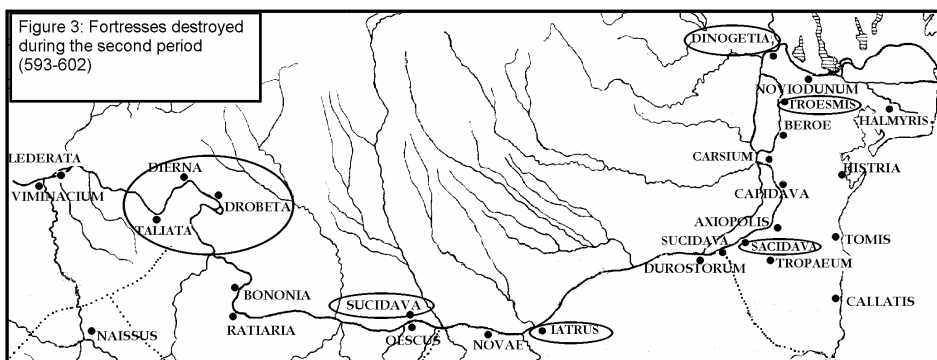
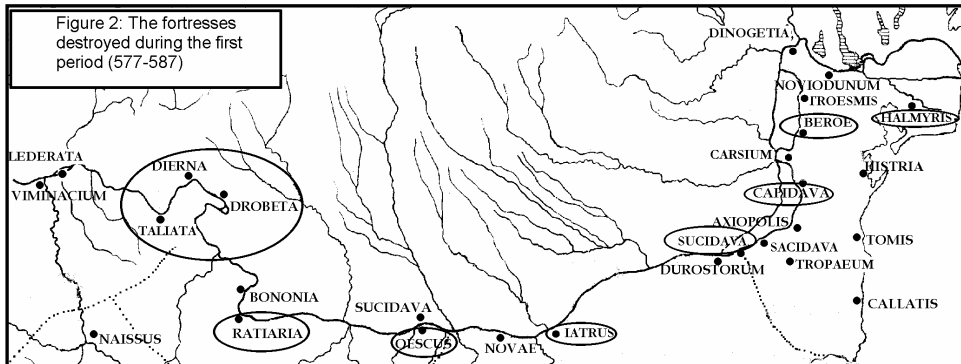
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**Figure 4: The final coins**

Site	Last coin	Source
Boljetin (Smorna)	592/593	V. Popović, <i>MEFRA</i> , 87, 1 (1975) 483
Veliki Gradac (Taliata)	594/595	D. Minić, <i>Numizmatičar</i> , 7 (1984) 39-47
Bosman (Ad Scorfulas)	595/596	V. Kondić, <i>Numizmatičar</i> , 7 (1984) 51-54

Celei (Sucidava)	596/597	E. Oberländer-Târnoveanu, <i>Études byzantines et post-byzantines</i> , 4 (Iași, 2001) 45
Drobeta-Turnu Severin (Drobeta)	598/599	<i>Ibidem</i> , 48
Kladovo	601/602	D. Janković, <i>Podunavski deo oblasti Akvisa u VI i početkom VII veka</i> (Belgrad, 1981) 214
Ostrov, point Piatra Frecăței (Beroe)	602-610	A. Barnea, I. Vasiliu, M. Iacob, D. Paraschiv, <i>Cronica cercetărilor arheologice. Campania 1999</i> (Deva, 2000) 72
Capidava	607/608	A. Vertan, G. Custurea, <i>Pontica</i> , 21-22 (1988-1989) 380, nr. 1306
Isaccea (Noviodunum)	610-641	G. Mănucu-Adameșteanu, <i>Pontica</i> , 28-29 (1995-1996) 288
Murighiol (Halmyris)	612/613	C. Opaîț, <i>Peuce</i> , 10 (1991) 473, nr. 123
Tulcea (Aegyssus)	613/614	E. Oberländer-Târnoveanu, <i>SCN</i> 7 (1980) 163, nr. 1
Nufăru	613/614	G. Mănucu-Adameșteanu, <i>Pontica</i> , 28-29 (1995-1996) 288
Cernavoda, point Hinog (Axiopolis)	614/615	G. Poenaru-Bordea, R. Ocheșeanu, E. Nicolae, <i>SCN</i> 9 (1989) 72, nr. 208
Dunăreni, point Muzait (Sacidava)	615/616	G. Custurea, G. Talmațchi, A. Vertan, <i>Pontica</i> , 32 (1999) 355, nr. 2077
Hârșova (Carsium)	629/630	G. Custurea, <i>Pontica</i> , 19 (1986) 277, nr. 6



Figure 5: The last coins

