25 [*Papers from the Institute of Archaeology* 4(1993) 25-36]

The use and abuse of numismatic evidence in southeastern Europe

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Introduction

> "... the ultimate skill of the archaeologist lies not only in the construction and handling of inferences, but in knowing at what point he or she must cease to infer anything at all."
> C. Thomas *Christianity in Roman Britain to A.D. 500*

Although this quote comes from a source which has very little relevance to the title of this paper, it is the philosophy expressed that marks its importance to the study of archaeological material in general. This paper provides an opportunity to study Roman Imperial coin hoards from the southern Balkan region, using the principle stated above to provide appropriate explanations for their burial, use and loss. The area of study covers the modern states of Bulgaria and Romania, divided for the most part by the river Danube flowing from west to east before entering the Black Sea. This is mirrored by the political situation during the Roman period when the Danube formed the border between the provinces of Moesia to the south and Dacia to the north. Today this allows us the advantage of studying patterns to either side of a linear boundary that was as relevant during the first to third centuries A.D. as it is at present (Fig. 1).

The land below the Danube was annexed in the 1st century A.D. during the reign of Claudius, becoming incorporated into two provinces: Moesia along the Danube, (later subdivided into Upper and Lower Moesia) and Thrace to the south of the river Haemus. These provinces formed the frontier of the Roman Empire for much of the period and were occupied well into the Byzantine era. Romania on the other hand was never fully occupied by Rome: the Dobrodgea (Danube delta area) was part of Moesia, while the Transylvanian plateau together with the Danubian plain of the Banat and Oltenia became the province of Dacia. It was the emperor Trajan at the beginning of the 2nd century A.D. who defeated the enigmatic King of the Dacians, Decebalus, and created Dacia. In the Imperial mind this province acted as a buffer zone between peoples outside the Empire and those who lay within it, often soaking up attacks which might otherwise have been directed towards the heartland of the Roman Balkans south of the Danube. This situation was only temporary however, as Dacia, unlike the southern provinces, was relinquished by the Romans under Aurelian between A.D. 271 and 274, after only 160 years of occupation.

The details of the coin hoards themselves were collected during May and June of 1992 while on post-graduate study leave to eastern Europe and it became immediately apparent that a great difference exists between hoards from Bulgaria and Romania.

At first glance the hoarding pattern of Bulgaria is not dissimilar to that of other areas of the Balkans, (i.e. the region that was formerly Yugoslavia), while that of Romania is distinctly unusual in its composition. The singular nature of Romanian hoards means that these can be used for the focus of a study such as this, which attempts to re-evaluate theories concerning the circulation and use of coins as well as their burial. That Romania includes areas which were under temporary Roman occupation next to others which remained 'free', makes it unique in the Empire and allows areas with varying degrees of Roman control to be compared.

The Approach and the Numismatic Background

One aspect of numismatic research that is quickly noticed in this region, is the effect the Danube has had over the past century as a largely impermeable barrier to ideas and theories. Bulgarian and

Romanian archaeologists and numismatists have followed differing paths when discussing hoards and their interpretation, although the practical research is done at the same two levels: the publication of hoards giving details of the coins themselves, often coupled with a summary of similar hoards and suggestions for reasons of burial; and more general numismatic/archaeological works in which coin circulation and hoarding are discussed in wider terms.

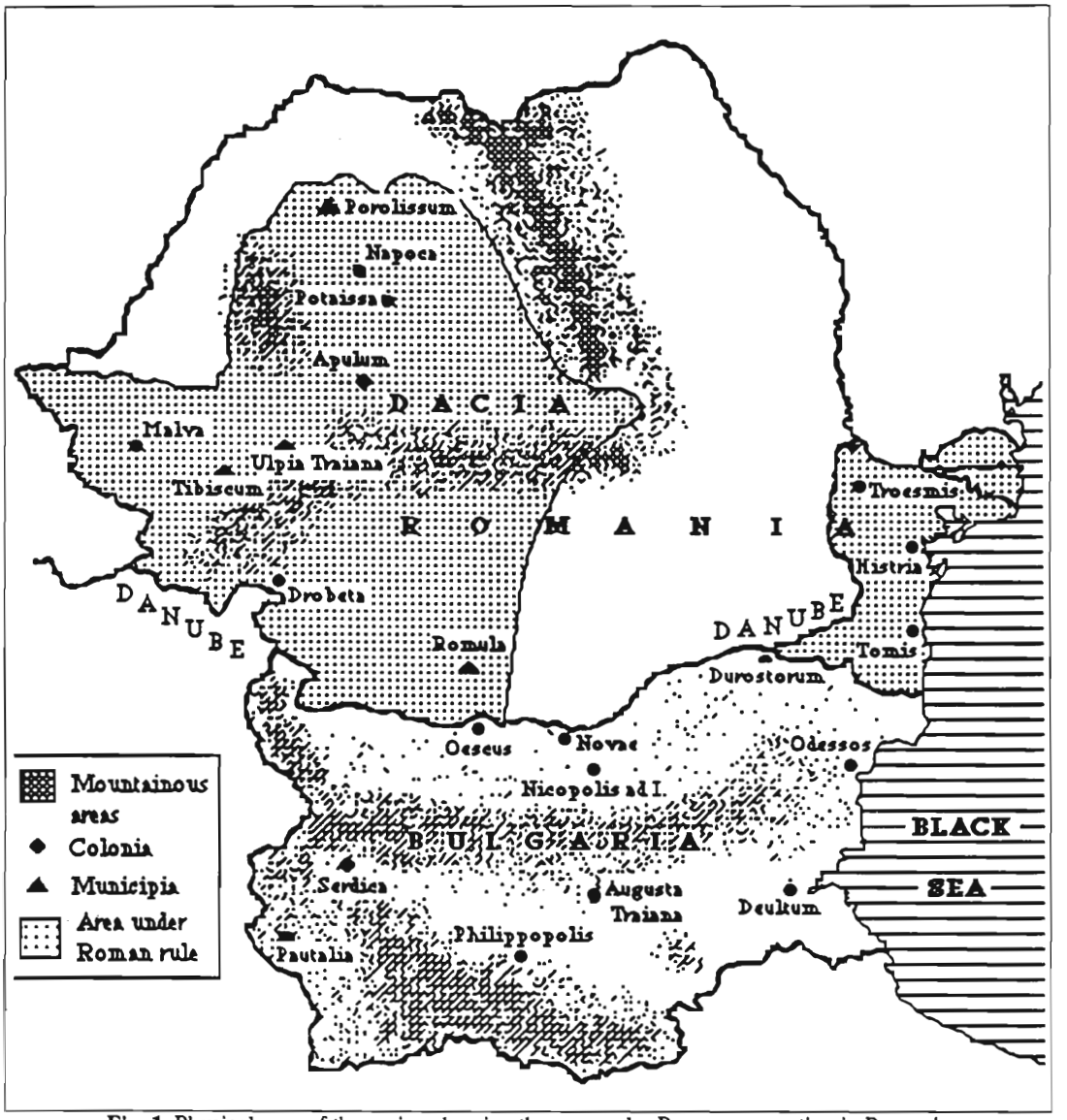

Fig. 1 Physical map of the region showing the area under Roman occupation in Romania

The Bulgarian state of affairs is summed up well by the article written by Gerov in which he studied a large sample of Imperial hoards dating from the 2nd to 4th centuries (Gerov1977).

In this the author attempted to attach every single one of the hoards to a threat of violence, whether evidenced or not. In doing so he was repeating a theory that was popular for many years all over Europe and which he expressed as follows:

"Coin hoards were hidden at all times and for various reasons. Their large scale burial at a specific time is an indicator of important events which disrupted the normal course of life; events which led to the deaths of the owners of the hidden hoards or to them being unable to return to their homes." (Gerov 1977: 112).

In Romania the circumstances are somewhat different due to the peculiar numismatic record of that country. A large proportion of research has been devoted to the discoveries of Roman Republican silver coins within pre-conquest Dacia, discoveries which indeed make Romania unique at this time outside Italy. The 'threat' theory has also been implied for these hoards (Chitescu 1981: 20), although many authors see these early Roman coins as evidence of commerce between Dacia and Rome (Berciu 1978: 30-42; Chitescu 1981: 65; Glodariu 1976: 50-52; Ardeleanu 1985: 32). By doing so the coin evidence is twisted to prove that their presence = external trade = commerce = moneyed economy = centralised Dacian State of Burebista and Decebalus.

When Imperial Roman hoards are discussed the focus of interpretation shifts to the problems of continuity and the origins of the Romanian people, a shift which is then reflected in the reasons given for hoard loss. The interpretation frequently reverts back to the 'threat' idea; the hoards then being used to trace the areas devastated by the barbarian incursions (Ocheseanu 1987, 1989; Daicoviciu 1969), although Daicoviciu in the same breath suggests that hoards are evidence of a stable population (Daicoviciu 1969: 383 note 49). In order to prove continuity during Romania's history, more extreme ideas occasionally appear, such as those of Protase who suggests that hoards can be used as indicators of 'ethnicity' and are able to differentiate 'ethnic groups' (Protase 1966: 227).

From the above, admittedly generalised, summary of the numismatic literature, it is plain that there is a need now for more unified and encompassing studies in order to explain the material that confronts us. To do so we must step back in a sense and begin looking at the evidence afresh and from completely different perspectives. Mihailescu-Birliba was correct when he suggested that modern perceptions and rules of economics should not be allowed to cloud our understanding of prehistoric and historic societies and their artefacts (Birliba 1990: 161).

Any new strategy or hypothesis must involve beginning initially with very basic concepts that up until now have never been answered, instead they have been side stepped by assumptions. The numismatist and the archaeologist must re-ask fundamental questions such as: how did coins spread across areas? Who used coins and when? How did these people perceive coins - as money or as something else? The question most appropriate for this study is, when/why did people bury their money and come to leave it in the ground?

These questions are not separate issues, they form part of a single archaeological phenomenon and must be treated as such. Unfortunately, the archaeological record is an indicator of past *actions* and not the past *thoughts* behind them and so most of the 'why' and 'how' questions are extremely difficult to answer. This is not to say that answers should not be attempted, but that this should be conducted as objectively as possible with continual reassessment and testing of the models put forward.

One path forward lies in moving from what we can hope to answer (the past actions), and use this as a launching point to tackle areas we shall never be quite sure of (the past thoughts). Thus the 'when' questions together with those concerning distribution and circulation can provide the basis for theories regarding the use of coins and the burial of hoards. Mihailescu-Birliba acknowledged that we must find explanations which do not overstep the limits of working theories and that the best approach is by constant comparisons of similar data from other areas (Birliba 1990: 162-164). We must always recognise the nature of our evidence and the restrictions this imposes upon our interpretations.

Bearing in mind the cautions mentioned above, the material here will be dealt with in what appears to be a very superficial fashion. The hoards will be looked at in general terms both geographically and chronologically - the emphasis lies therefore upon patterns and trends rather than any individual specific details. Comparisons between Bulgarian and Romanian hoards form the core - any similarities

or differences which then appear require interpretation which must be conducted by deductive logic rather than recourse to historical references.

The Use of Coins

The hoards are arranged chronologically in figure 2 with the whole time span from Augustus to the end of the fourth century A.D. presented; the lengths of each phase being taken into account in order to level out discrepancies which might be caused by extremely long or short phases. Both Bulgaria and Romania show similar overall patterns (which are generally appropriate for most of the Empire), with hoarding occurring sporadically up to the early second century A.D., after which it continues at a constant low level up to the mid third century.

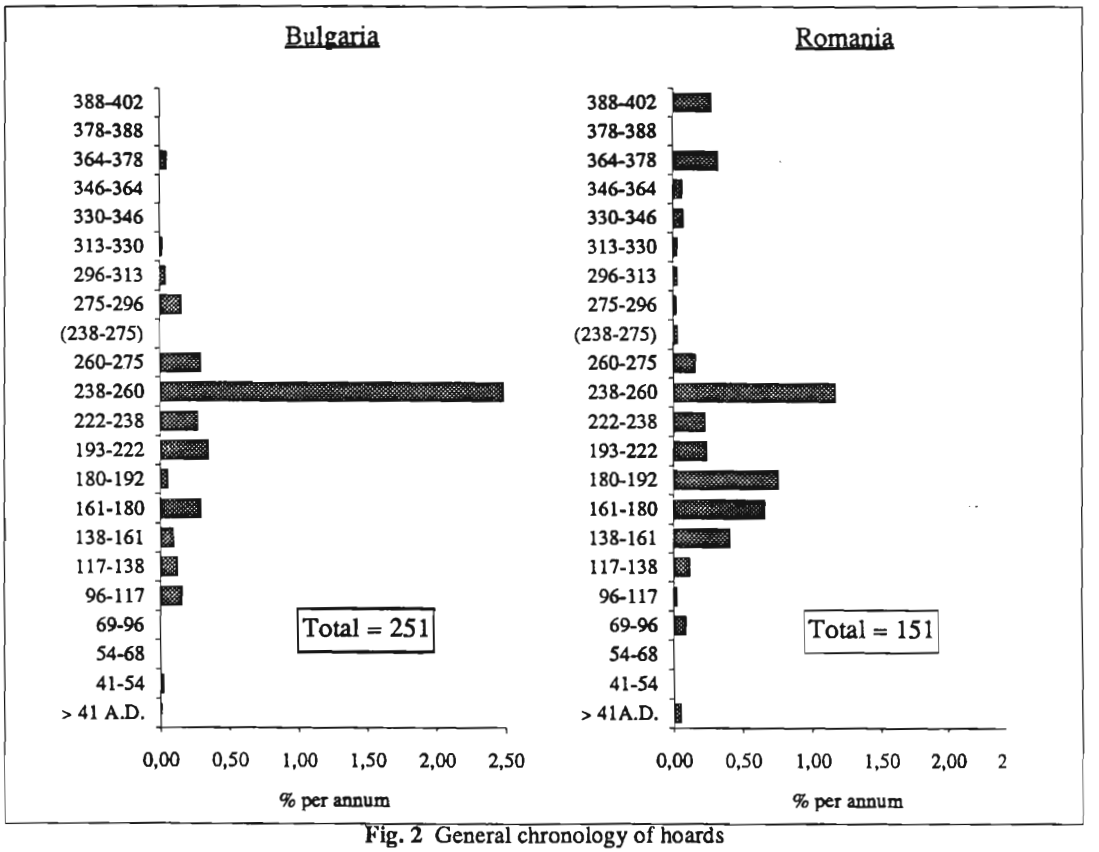

Fig. 2 General chronology of hoards

During the years A.D. 238-260, the number of hoards per year rises dramatically - more so in Bulgaria than Romania - after which the level drops off again to very low rates, almost disappearing completely in Bulgaria. The differences in the two chronologies appear in the fourth century as well as in the period A.D. 138-192, when Romania produces a trend of increase against the standard low level present in Bulgaria.

From this general chronology we can move onto the types of coin which cause these two patterns. The silver coins are shown in figure 3, indicating that overall the hoarding patterns in this metal are again fairly similar. The burial of the denarius extends through the second and into the early third centuries, by which time it had fallen from a premium 90% silver to less than 50%. This proportion fell almost

year by year until A.D. 241 when it effectively ceased to be minted. In the year A.D. 215 a new silver coin, the radiatus, was introduced which weighed about one-and-a-half times as much as the denarius, but which it is assumed, was tariffed at two denarii. The radiatus suffered the same decrease in metal content until it contained below 2% silver in the period A.D. 260-275.

This new coin is rarely hoarded on its own; the hoarders of silver appear to have saved the old denarius as often as possible. This is indicated by the lack of radiates from A.D. 215 to 241 as well as the presence of old denarii in mixed hoards after this date, even when new denarii were no longer being produced. The main difference in figure 3 occurs in the period A.D. 138-192, Romania providing far more hoards of silver per year than Bulgaria, as already noted in figure 2.

When the bronze hoards are depicted (Fig. 4), the similarity of the patterns from Bulgaria and Romania seen thus far, suddenly deviates to a remarkable degree.

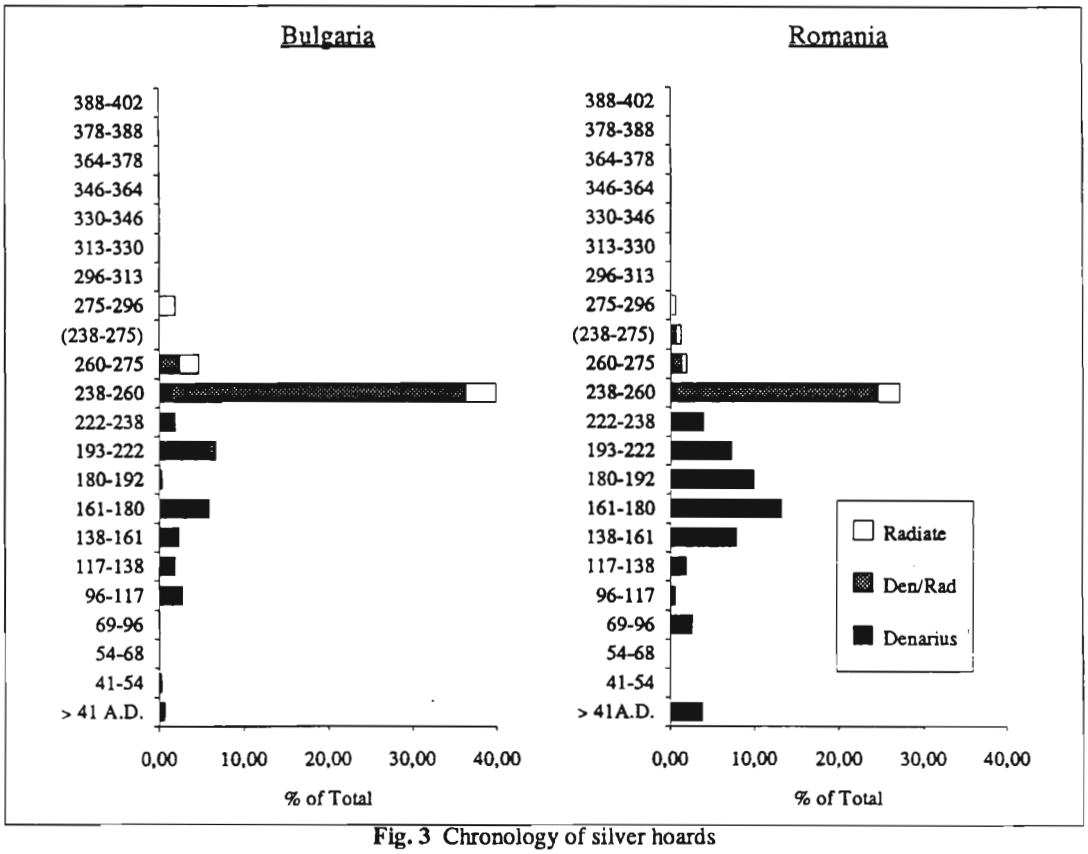

Fig. 3 Chronology of silver hoards

While the hoards of bronze and bronze/silver from Bulgaria show the same basic pattern seen in figures 2 and 3, the situation in Romania is radically different. Here there are only two bronze hoards altogether, bronze and silver are not mixed at all and gold hoards appear twice, although very weakly.

This brief chronological survey of hoards and their constituents immediately produces several differences which need explanation:

1) Why does Romania produce a mini-peak of silver hoards in A.D. 138 -192?
2) Why does the radiate not appear in hoards until 20 years after its introduction?
3) Why does the denarius remain in hoards up to 40 years after its withdrawal?

4) Why does Romania produce only two bronze hoards?

Once these have been explained we may be able to answer four fundamental questions about coins and currency in this area of the Roman Empire:

5) Who used coins?
6) How did they perceive coins?
7) What role did coins play in society?
8) How did coins circulate and for how long?

The answers seem to relate to the value of the precious metal contained within the coins and how the hoarders viewed this value.

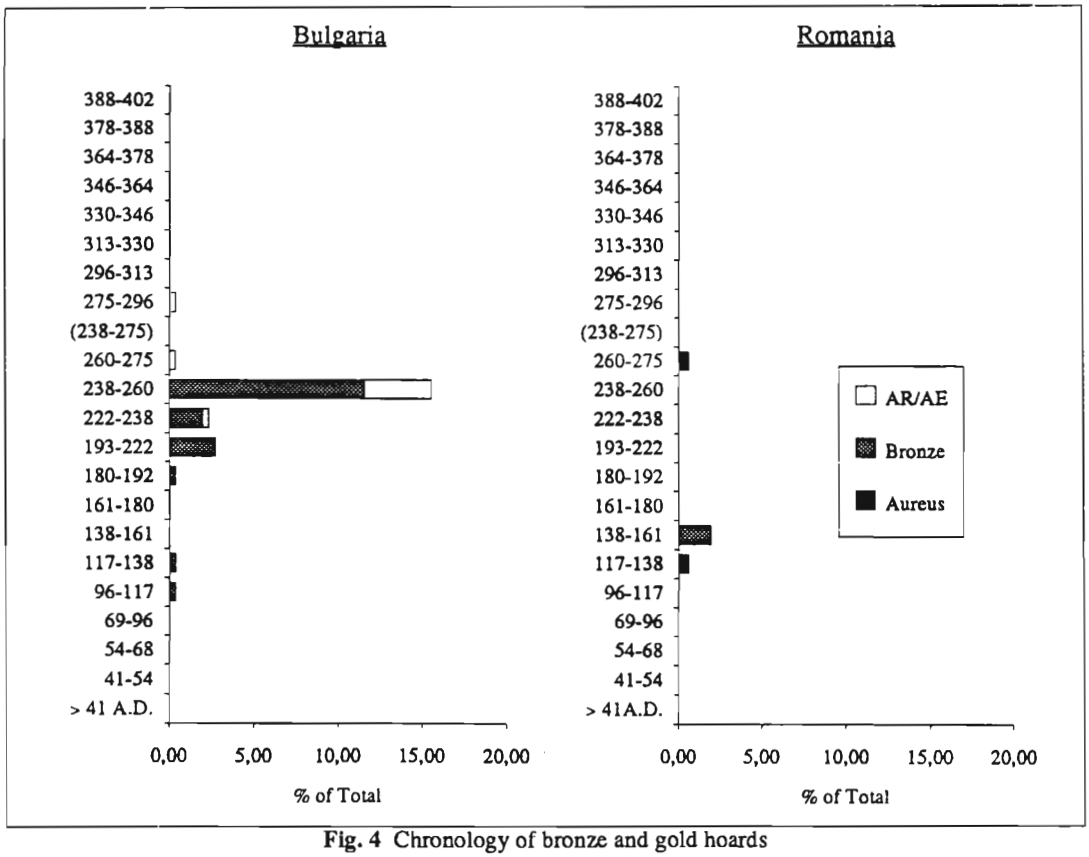

Fig. 4 Chronology of bronze and gold hoards

The Roman Empire issued coins of various denominations based on three metals: gold, silver and bronze - which must theoretically have been interchangeable, whatever the quantity of valuable metal within them. In practice this does not appear to have been how the hoarders in both areas saw the situation - they shunned low quality silver coins (the radiate), in favour of the older 'better' silver coins (the denarius), which explains points 2 and 3 above. In the same vein, the Romanian peak of silver hoards in figure 3 (point 1), may have been due to the debasement of the denarius under Septimius Severus in A.D. 194/5 when the silver content was reduced to c. 50%. Thus hoarders in Romania were attempting to save coins up to 50 years old which would otherwise have been withdrawn by the state from circulation and re-issued as lower quality new coins.

This implies a view of currency in Romania removed from that of the Roman state, in that the value

depended upon the actual metal content of the coin and not the value dictated by the Empire. This is borne out by point 4 which shows how Romanian hoarders were not interested in saving bronze as these coins had no precious metal value.

In Bulgaria however the population was practising the Roman system - hoarding small change which did have a value as it could be exchanged for silver and vice versa.

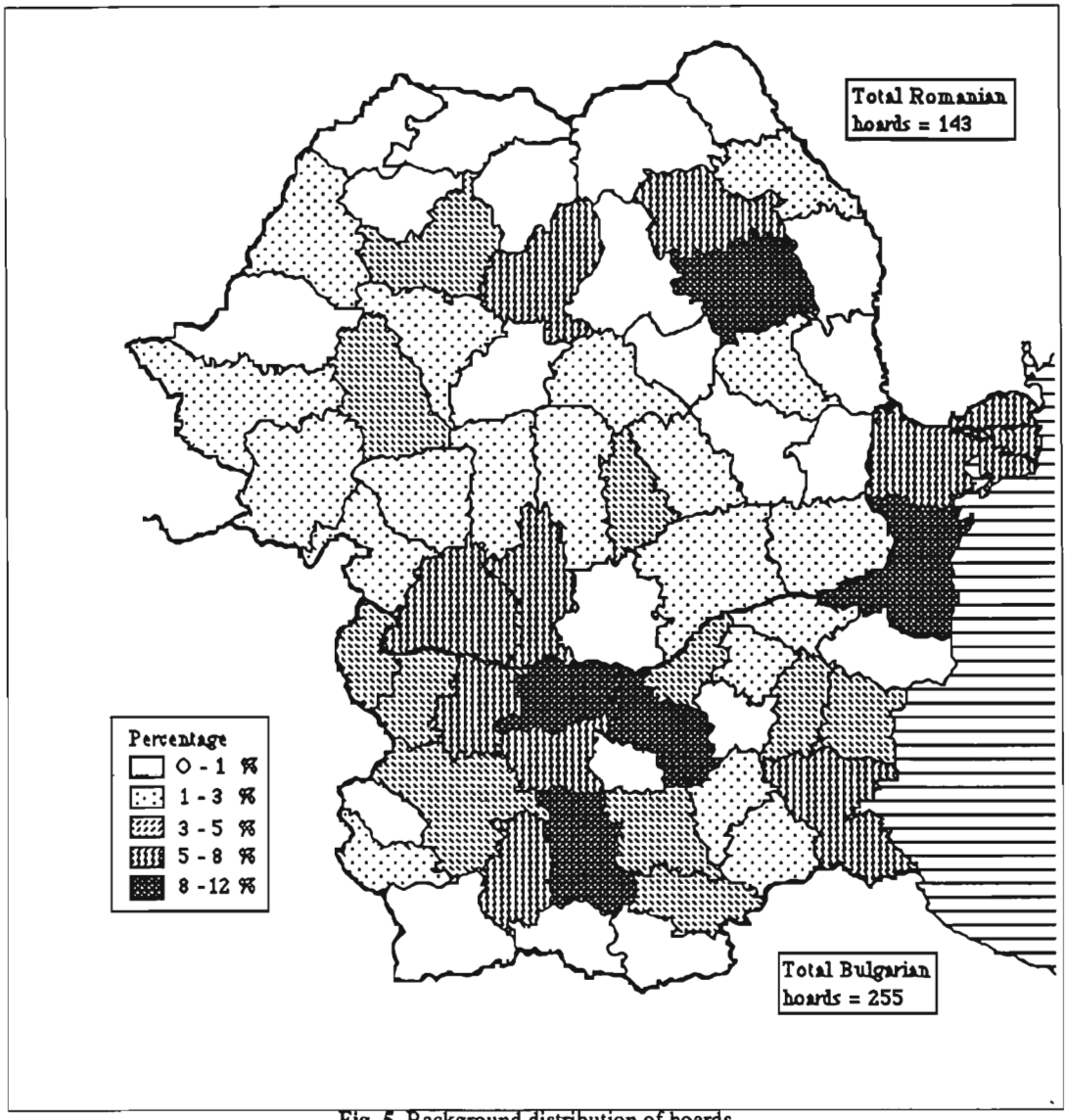

Fig. 5 Background distribution of hoards

The Bulgarian situation appears to have been fairly fragile however - any sudden drop in the amount of silver reduced confidence in the new issues. It is also interesting to note that firstly, bronze is only hoarded in Bulgaria when the silver content of the denarius begins to decline increasingly rapidly and secondly, that bronze and silver are buried together only when the lack of silver in the denarius/radiate brought their real values down nearer to the value of the bronze 'small' change.

For the last four questions set out above, it is possible to suggest explanations for just two at this stage. If old coins appeared in hoards buried up to 50 years after their date of minting, then the possibility that they circulated for this length of time cannot be avoided.

This causes problems when dating hoards as doubt must be cast on the use of the latest coin to provide an accurate date of burial and loss.

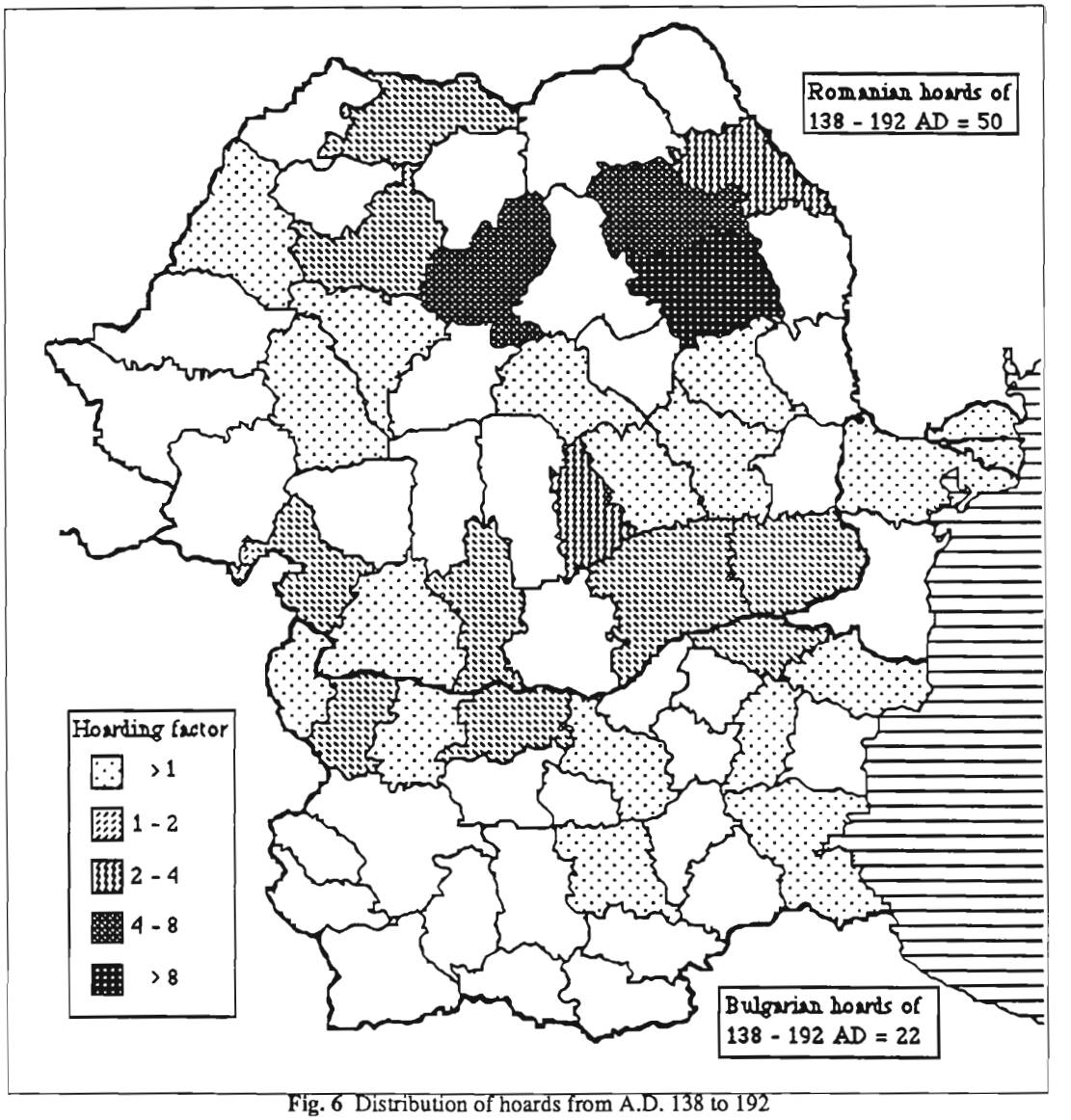

Fig. 6 Distribution of hoards from A.D. 138 to 192

Chitescu based her interpretations of Republican hoards upon the close dating of the last coin in a hoard (Chitescu 1981: 16). If this is not possible in practice due to the apparent difference between the date of coin's appearance and the length of time it circulated for, then the last coin in a hoard can only provide a *terminus post quem* and no more.

The second question we may be able to answer concerns the perception of coins by a region's

population. If the people of ancient Dacia saw coins as objects of precious metal then this was far removed from how they were meant to perceive them; as part of an exchangeable, multi-denominational currency system. How they did view coins in reality has to remain a mystery, but the evidence must have great implications for the questions of who used coins as well as the role of currency in society.

The Burial of Hoards

Using the conclusions reached concerning the use of coins in Roman Bulgaria and Romania, it should now become possible to move on to the problem of who buried hoards, when and why.

Figure 5 shows the general geographical background against which hoards of a specific period or type have to be set in order to gain an idea of the degree of variation from the normal distribution. On this map the hoards are shown regionally as a percentage of each nation's total in order to avoid the greater number of Bulgarian hoards smothering those from Romania, as would happen were they to be combined.

To attempt to see if there is a possibility of identifying centres or zones of hoarding within the entire area, figures 6 and 7 then look in greater detail at the hoards from two periods of time using a slightly altered method in order to remove certain geographical biases. The evidence is combined for each map to reflect Bulgaria's greater number of hoards and then adjusted to take account of Romanian characteristics. Thus the distribution can be viewed as part of a single entity rather than as two separate modern nations:

$$\text{Hoarding Factor} = \frac{\text{No. for Region in Period}}{\text{National overall total}} \times \frac{\text{National Period total}}{\text{Combined overall total}} \times 1000$$

This results in a figure which may be called the Hoarding Factor (HF) of a region which represents that region's number of hoards in terms of its national and international backgrounds.

Figure 6 shows the distribution of hoards from the years A.D. 138 to 192 which form the mini-peak within the Romanian chronology (see Figs. 2 and 3). Bulgaria shows a fairly even low level HF, perhaps concentrating along the Danube and the Black Sea coast. Romania on the other hand presents higher concentrations to the north and east of the country, on a background of widespread hoarding. This is interesting as coins were buried in the areas outside Dacia as frequently as those within the Roman province; in fact it is in these extra-provincial regions that the highest HF occurs.

Figure 7 moves on to hoards buried in the period A.D. 238-260, hoards that form the large peaks in both Bulgarian and Romanian chronologies (see Fig. 2). Here the focus of hoarding has shifted dramatically to the provinces south of the Danube (Moesia and Thrace), where the overall HF is very high with concentrations around Plovdiv (Philippopolis). The Romanian pattern in contrast is geographically very restricted; the regions which show any HF at all are (with only one exception) situated within the boundaries of Dacia and Lower Moesia.

Once more even such a broad analysis requires explanations for several differences that occur:

1) Why is there such a general spread over Romania in the years A.D. 138-192?
2) Why does the highest HF occur outside Dacia in the years A.D. 138-192?
3) Why is there such a restricted distribution in Romania from A.D. 238 to 260?
4) Why is there such a high concentration HF in Bulgaria from A.D. 238 to 260?
5) Why do Romanian hoards of A.D. 238-260 occur only within the Empire?

If we are able to provide explanations then two basic questions concerning hoards can be answered:

6) Who buried coins?
7) Why did they bury coins?

In the case of hoards the answers seem to relate back to how coins were perceived and used, directly affecting how, why and when they were buried.

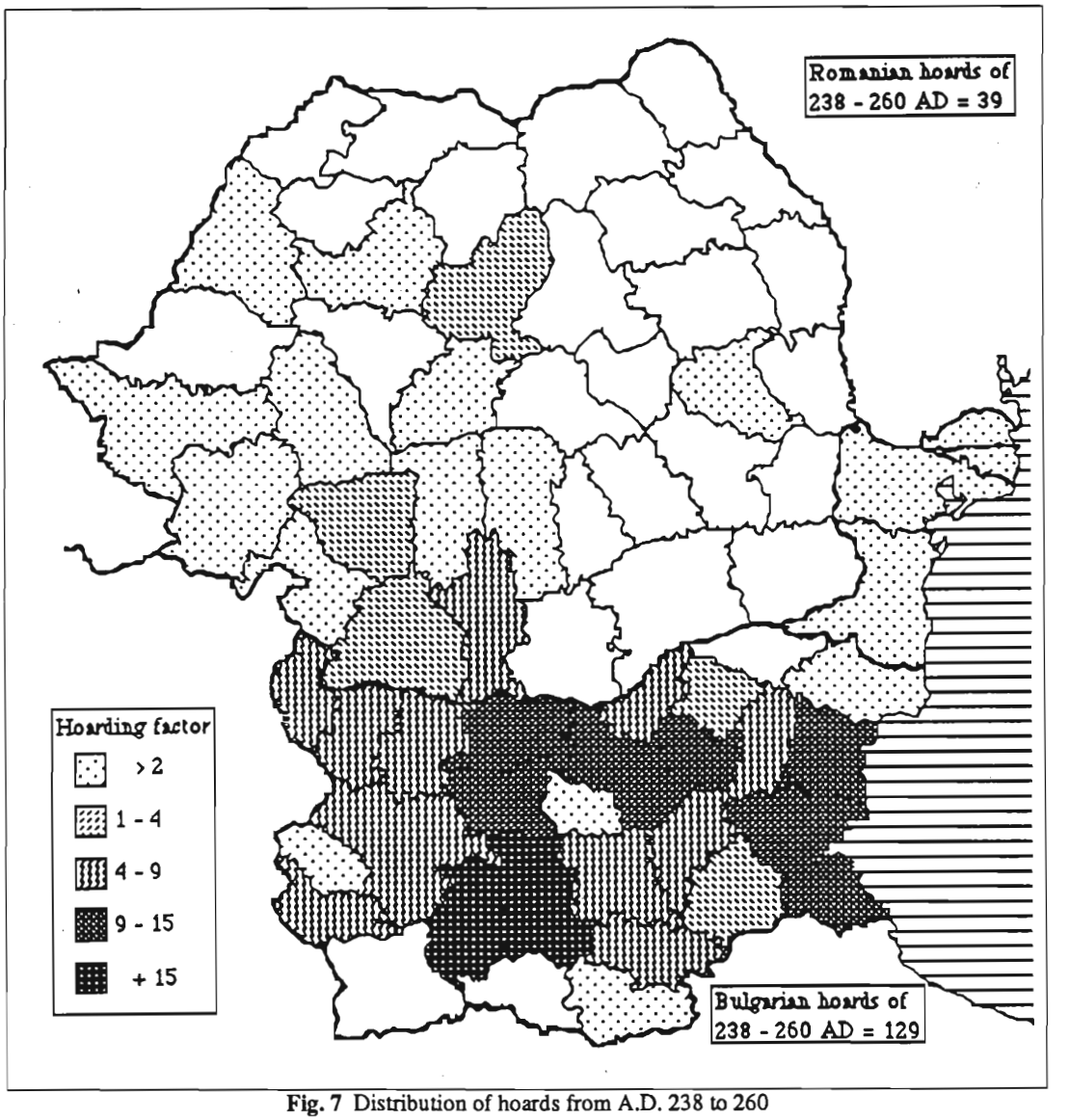

Fig. 7 Distribution of hoards from A.D. 238 to 260

The common denominator which links points 1, 2 and 3 is the relationship between areas and people inside or outside the Roman provincial borders. Points 1 and 2 (see Fig. 6) appear to indicate that whether inside or outside, Romanian hoarders buried the same coins from A.D. 138-192; the latter even more actively than the former. If it is correct that the silver content was of prime importance to the ancient population and that the burial of silver coins from A.D. 138 to 192 was a reaction to the Severan

debasement of the denarius, then the distribution of hoards across Roman as well as 'free' Dacia represents spatial continuity of a non-Roman perspective towards currency.

During the period between A.D. 238 and 260 (point 3 and Fig. 7), this relationship between the hoarding patterns within and without Dacia is completely different. Hoarding no longer occurs outside Dacia and is much reduced in Roman Dacia compared to Bulgaria. This seems to suggest a change in the perception and use of coins. The population outside the Empire did not bury coins of this period, possibly due to the reduced silver content making them less attractive as objects of value. The Roman Dacians however, continued to hoard new coins perhaps due to changing attitudes enabling them to be viewed as part of a currency system, not just metal artefacts.

The phenomenon of higher hoarding outside Dacia during the mid to late second century was noted by Chitescu who saw it as evidence of Romanization spreading beyond the Empire and affecting the barbarian lands nearby (Chitescu 1981: 68). This must now be rejected for two reasons: firstly, it is only in periods of good silver coinage that this occurs and not when coins contained very little silver (compare Figs. 6 and 7) and, secondly, that Romania as a whole shows definite variations from the 'Roman norm' found in Bulgaria (see Figs. 2,3,4,6 and 7).

To provide answers for points 4 and 5 we must expand the discussion to include point 7 - why were hoards buried? As was mentioned in the literature survey earlier, the most popular explanation for why hoards were buried and lost is that of 'threat'. Daicoviciu sees hoards of the late second and the mid third centuries resulting from instability among the population due to invasions of various barbarian peoples, notably the Carpi and Goths (Daicoviciu 1969: 374). Gerov when discussing Bulgaria, also stresses the importance of such invasions throughout the Roman period, but especially in the mid third century years of crisis (Gerov1977: 113, 127-145).

If the 'threat' theory is to remain valid then we must account for the significant differences north and south of the Danube in the period A.D. 238-260 (see Fig. 7). Bulgaria certainly does appear to hoard at an extremely high level and this might support the suggestion of invasions being the primary cause. If this is so however, we would expect to see a similar high level in Romania, which we do not. Does this mean that Dacia was avoided by barbarian attacks or that the 'threat' theory does answer all the evidence? Similarly the 'threat' idea must explain why almost every area of the Empire from Aquitaine and Britain in the west to Yugoslavia and Bulgaria in the east, experiences such a high peak in the mid third century. Surely a blanket explanation using barbarian invasions and civil wars cannot be appropriate on such an enormous scale.

So, why were coin hoards buried and lost? Unfortunately, we may never be able to solve this problem, nor that of who it was who buried them in the first place and failed to retrieve them. It does appear to be the case that economic factors were more heavily involved than has previously been admitted. The silver content of coins seems to be just such a factor; another may have been the availability of coins to the population. Figure 2 reveals how the peak of A.D. 238-260 is followed by the virtual disappearance of hoards in the next 20 years. It is possible that the coin hoards from this peak should be spread more evenly over a longer time span to include later years when new coins circulated poorly, or were simply not available in sufficient numbers to supply demand. Figure 7 would then portray the situation not over 22 years, but rather over almost 60, during which time Dacia was abandoned by Rome, perhaps severely reducing coin supply and leading to the lower level of hoarding when compared to other provinces of the Empire.

It may also be true that archaeologists and numismatists are studying hoards from the wrong angle altogether. Instead of viewing levels of hoarding as indicators of instability and death, they should be seen as indicators of the volume of coin circulation. In this model, periods during which more coins circulate to all levels of society enable more hoards to be gathered as part of daily life within that society. If we exclude loss by unnatural causes completely, then peaks and troughs of hoarding appear because we are studying the *same* proportion of hoards lost naturally out of *varying* quantities of hoards buried in the first place.

Summary

One aspect of coin studies that the casual observer might notice is the vast amount of unknowns that surround the subject. The nature of coins themselves has led to their study being typified by its insular character with purely numismatic facts becoming attached to archaeological conclusions. The most obvious of these is that although a coin of Philip I was minted between A.D. 244 and 249, this has no bearing on when this coin reached all parts of the Empire and fulfilled its role in circulation before being lost in a drain or as part of a hoard.

Until the discovery of a collection of coins in a vessel inscribed with the name of the owner, their position in society as well as when and why he or she buried the pot, archaeologists must be left on their own when interpreting hoards. But numismatists do not float within an archaeological void - they are inter-connected with all other archaeological discoveries, which should be used to provide explanations. The most difficult task for the archaeologist, as C. Thomas understood, is not to abuse them.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following people for their kindness and assistence. Gh. Poenaru Bordea and R. Ocheseanu in Bucarest, V. Mihailescu Birliba in Iasi, Mr. Dimitrov in Bulgaria for allowing access to his private records and all the museum curators who were so helpful in providing information. Finally I. Prokopov, P. Ignatov and J. Meshekov in Kjustendil deserve special mention for their hospitality and friendship.

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