

Ancient Numismatics of the Bosporan Kingdom in 20th Century French Historiography

*By Kristina Yahuzhynska**

After 2014, archeological activities in eastern Ukraine were disrupted and many projects were halted due to military conflicts between Russia and Ukraine. The cultural treasury of the Bosporan Kingdom remains a bone of contention for modern empires for more than 1000 years of its existence. The numismatic research of the Bosporan coins conceals enormous potential for critical discoveries for the history of European and Asian cultures in future decades. The historiographical studies of the currency of the Bosporan Kingdom are the result of the exchange of information between researchers of different generations in global geographic and virtual spaces, usually at the intersection of archaeology, economic history, numismatics and epigraphy, sphragistics, cultural anthropology, history, etc. disciplines, in particular contextual numismatic as “the most recent and innovative direction of research in the field of numismatics”. The objective of my dissertation is to review and analyze French-language publications relating to the Bosporan’s coinage, which was one of the main tools with which kings “played” their political propaganda game, according to researchers from the Hellenic Studies University in the comprehensive publication “Art at the service of political propaganda: Mithridates”. Jérôme Jambu, Mathieu de Oliveira - our contemporaries proved, that money as an object is undoubtedly one of the areas of modern and contemporary French historiography which, in recent decades, has been the least popular at a time when material, economic and social history is undergoing a profound renewal. If numismatics, studied in tandem with monetary production, experienced a certain golden age between the late 19th century and the mid-20th century, it has been dormant since the work of MM. Lafaurie et Prieur and F. C. Spooner and has been undergoing a slow renewal for the last 20 years, which is only waiting to be amplified. The history of money and circulation of the Bosporan Kingdom has a multi-level structure due to its integration in the system of other empires and various evolving political structures of East and West (absolute monarchies of Asia Minor and Egypt, tribes of the Black Sea, Taman peninsula, Prikubanie and eastern Azov, democratic politics Greece, tribes of Iranian and Germanic groups, Roman empire, Byzantium) until Hellenistic Kingdoms of the India. Some researchers began to investigate ancient Greek Kingdoms in China and the influence of the Hellenic world on the Chinese and other Eastern civilizations, including Japan and Korea.

Keywords: *Bosporan Kingdom, Ancient Numismatics, French Historiography, Archaeology of the Black Sea Region, Cultural Heritage, Cross-Cultural Exchange*

*PhD Student, Central Ukrainian National University, Kropyvnytskyi, Ukraine.

Introduction

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The cultural treasury of the Bosporan Kingdom remains a bone of contention for modern empires for more than 1000 years of its existence. The numismatic research of the Bosporan coins conceals enormous potential for critical discoveries for the history of European and Asian cultures in future decades.

This research explores the significant contributions of Francophone scholarship to the study of Bosporan coinage of the Hellenic era. The relevance lies in lack of special investigations, dedicated to an analysis of francophone historiographical sources of XX century about the Bosporan Kingdom monetary system.

The present research is based on a cross-disciplinary inquiry taking into account that Bosporan coins are appropriated to a specific cross-cultural artifact type from other parallel cultures (Skythian, Hellenic, Roman, Persian civilizations) and are not just scientific objects for elements of humans communicating in a culture, but a vital information of geopolitics and economy as well as an evolution of art.

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The objective of my dissertation is to review and analyze twentieth-and twenty-first century French-language publications that discuss the use of coinage as a tool for political propaganda by Bosporan kings according to researchers from the Hellenic Studies University in the comprehensive publication “Art at the Service of Political Propaganda: Mithridates VI Eupator and His Coinage (Hellenic Studies University Press 2015).

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¹Krmnicek, 2023: item number: 256.

²Jérôme Jambu, Matthieu de Oliveira, *Revue du Nord* 2014/3 (n° 406), page 493.

began to investigate ancient Greek Kingdoms in China³ and the influence of the Hellenic world on the Chinese and other Eastern civilizations, including Japan and Korea⁴.

Review Methodology/Materials and Methods

It is necessary to systemize the materials of specialists in various disciplines - sociologists, historians, economists, politics, and all fields of humanitarian scientists.

In a 20th century monograph on Oriental numismatics of antiquity and the Middle Ages, J. de Morgan describes the coinage of the Bosporan Kingdom using archeological evidence and ancient sources as Dion Cassius⁵.

The harmonious combination of archeological and methods and the study of ancient sources -including controversial information – forms the foundation of twentieth -century numismatic historiography.

This research is conducted entirely using digital resources, representing a new and effective methodology in modern scientific study. The Internet allows one to get acquainted immediately with archeological numismatic discoveries from all over the world and unknown coins, selling at auctions. As it is noticed in the media of the Interencheres-auction group «Magazine des enchères» by an expert Françoise Berthelot-Vinchon, "in uncertain times, ancient currencies serve as a refuge value, several centuries after their issuance, they still have value".

The publication from 8th of May 2025 «Investing: ancient currencies, safe values» analyzes price growth and the future of stable investments, where Greek currencies (Bosporan coins we may understand as well) are included in the role of a reliable investment. "It is always an attractive coinage, with rather few means they have produced absolutely exceptional coins," admires Françoise Berthelot-Vinchon⁶.

In addition to news about discoveries of numismatic material the Internet provides a direct access to fresh ideas from the latest publications of French-speaking experts on coins of the Pontic region (Hélène Nicolet-Pierre, Michel Amandry, François de Callatay, as well as not famous talented investigators) and an entrance to archives of scientific institutions all over the world (Athens Institute, The American Numismatic Society-New York, Société française de Numismatique - Paris, The Royal Numismatic Society of Belgium etc).

Especially precious for exploration of the coinage of the Bosporan Kingdom are digitized French-speaking rare documents taken from the repositories of European royal libraries and Medieval universities, typographies, academies,

³<https://greekreporter.com/2024/10/06/ancient-greek-kingdom-china/>.

⁴https://www.researchgate.net/publication/378252508_HELLENES_OR_SCYTHIANS_THE_PROBLEM_OF_FOREIGN_CULTURAL_INFLUENCES_IN_NORTHERN_CHINA_IN_THE_SECOND_HALF_OF_THE_1ST_MILLENNIUM.

⁵Dion Cassius IX, 8.

⁶<https://magazine.interencheres.com/collection-encheres/investir-les-monnaies-anciennes-des-valeurs-sures/>

museums, monasteries, private collections of France, geographical maps and numismatic catalogues.

At present, France is one of the pioneers in digitizing its history, mainly with its governmental project Gallica - an electronic library of the National Library of France and its partners. Information about minting of bosporan coins can be found also online in credible Bibliothèque et ressources documentaires of the collections of the Louvre Palace (l'École du Louvre), La Bibliothèque de la Sorbonne Nouvelle (BSN), École française d'Athènes, official catalogues- websites of modern banks (Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec), French-speaking scientific interdisciplinary electronic encyclopedias and archives of all continents.

Problems and Debates

It can be seen that while the Hellenistic period as a whole is widely studied, research specifically focusing on the Kingdom of Bosporus is less extensive, particularly from a numismatic perspective.

Swiss professor P. Burgunder, presenting his francophone book on the antiquities of the Bosporan Kingdom on the official channel of university in Lausanne, comments that the incredibly interesting and important subject of the Bosporan Kingdom remains «exotic» little known to most Western scientists.

In his opinion, although there are currently not enough archeological material available in the territories where Bosphorus Kingdom was located, these areas hold great promise for future discoveries by international research groups.

It highlights two reasons for this situation in the recent past: the language barrier - the complex language of the Slavs for free communication with western colleagues, and ideological, namely the «iron curtain» between the USSR and the West until 1991⁷.

Therefore, the economic history of the Bosporan Kingdom offers more than one question for polemic scientific discourse in different fields of sciences. For example, the problem of copper coins without exact attributes, "anonymous pontic copper". They are first studied by F. Imhof-Bloomer, who considers them as a power instrument of Mithridates VI Eupator in the Bosporan Kingdom and the Colchis⁸. In a systematic approach, narrow questions of numismatics become

⁷Trésors du royaume du Bosphore Cimmérien.

⁸Imhof-Blümer F. Griechische Münzen. B., 1890. S. 409 u. folg. (= 564 u. folg.). Taf. III. 7; Idem. Die Kupferprägung des Mithradatischen Reichs und anderen Münzen des Pontus und Paphlagoniens // NZ. 1912. Bd. 45, H. 2. S. 184-186. № 81. Taf. II. 3. ruler to underline this dual, Persian-Greek descent... Mithridates adoption of aspects of Persian kingship-also in the iconography on his coinage⁹. Since the 20th century the contemporary vision of numismatic materials demonstrates often the rethinking of ancient social-cultural evolution and psychology strategies of rulers. The coins of the kings of the Bosporan Kingdom are found in gold, electrum, silver and bronze. Electrum is very variable in gold content. This natural alloy was then supplied by the Urals. The Bosporan Kingdom has played the role of one of the world's shopping malls. For many centuries, the Kingdom of the Bosporus was an important transit partner of Athens. The Greeks carried two hundred thousand hectoliters of wheat a year, as well as metals and furs from Scythia. Thus, prior to the merger with the Pontic Kingdom under the reign of Mithridates VI, the great rulers of the Bosporan Kingdom left behind medals bearing illustrations and inscriptions of Greek legends—valuable sources for

important as an additional study of political economy, history of civilizations, and understanding why one social order is finally more effective than another. For example, Rolf Strootman in his research “Persian Propaganda of Mithridates Eupator” (Utrecht University, 2024) used conclusions of the numismatics field from French investigator Lerouge-Cohen (Paris, 2017). “Mithridates was the first Hellenistic.

Because the traces of Bosporan currency circulation are most visible in sociological and cultural contexts, they call for analysis through systemic frameworks — what Immanuel Wallerstein would frame as ‘world-systems.

Photo 1. *Mithridates, framed within a Dionysian Wreath of Ivy and Fruit*⁹



Source: official site of the American Numismatic Society, <https://numismatics.org/pocketchange/unknown/>

Sources of Research and Evolution of Interest

Following the most effective scientific trends among professional francophones numismatists, Patrick Counillon published in French in Bordeaux in 2004 a manuscript «Pseudo-Skylax: le périple du Pont-Euxin: texte, traduction, commentaire philologique et historique». The Bryn Mawr Classical Review has made an in-depth analysis of his work,¹⁰ launching an innovative way of approaching numismatic research for future scientists.

The other serious bibliographical force of this thin volume is the impressive use of recent archaeological and numismatic publications relating to the Black Sea coastline, combining it with philological and onomastic aspects. Counillon has compiled detailed footnotes to allow the most avid investigator to locate the specific specimens and examples that support and illustrate the statements in the text. Thus, he observes only in his main discussion: «It is around this time [the

understanding ancient Greek culture. One such example is a masterpiece attributed to Mithridates himself, framed within a Dionysian wreath of ivy and fruit (Photo 1).

⁹Rolf Strootman. Utrecht University. The Polyglot King: The Persian Ideology of Mithradates VI Eupator of Pontus, page 241.

¹⁰<https://bmcr.brynmawr.edu/2006/2006.05.43/>.

beginning of the fourth century] that the first currencies of two of our Pontic cities, Krômna and Sèsamos, appear, currencies which share the same monetary type», but provides further comments in the notes on the uniqueness of this type as well as full references to SNG numbers. In the same vein, when he reported on Hamilton's 19th-century observations of the iron and steel industry in the Ünye region, he provided numerous references to modern geological studies.

A direct interest of European scientific and bourgeois society in the history of Bosporan coinage even during the turbulent 20th century is evidenced by a remarkable episode: in 1934, a Bosporan stater from the collection of the State Hermitage Museum was sold, reportedly on the personal orders of Joseph Stalin, to a private collector as part of the Soviet campaign of art sales intended to finance the country's industrialization. According to *CoinsWeekly*¹¹, the coin subsequently entered what is considered the most important private collection of Greek coins ever assembled—the collection of Charles Gillet (1879–1972), a French industrialist and connoisseur of antiquities.

The new record of public numismatic investment was set in May 2023 at an auction in Switzerland. A 2,000-Year-Old Greek gold stater was sold for 6 million dollars (Photo 2.). "I am extremely pleased with the phenomenal result the sale of the Panticapaeum stater achieved at our latest auction in Zurich," Arturo Russo, co-director at Numismatica Ars Classica, said in a statement. "This is a sign the whole market for numismatics is flourishing, and is especially strong for ancients at the moment."¹² Thus, the coin of the Bosporan Kingdom is the most expensive old coin ever sold at auction. Numismatic materials and rare documents, carefully preserved in private collections throughout the turbulent 20th century, remain among the most valuable sources for studying bosporan coins - including those held by Francophone collectors from Switzerland, Belgium and beyond Europe.

Photo 2. *Greek Gold Stater*



Source: <https://news.artnet.com/market/ancient-greek-coin-most-expensive-6-million-2307811>

¹¹<https://new.coinsweekly.com/news-en/panticapaeum-stater-most-expensive-ancient-coin/>

¹²<https://news.artnet.com/market/ancient-greek-coin-most-expensive-6-million-2307811>

Conclusions

The interest of Western society and French-speaking scientists in the study of numismatic monuments of Bosphoran culture at the end of the 20th century is growing and becoming increasingly specialized for periods and regions on the positive influence of digitalization and globalization. For example, the articles in the 2004 University of Orléans collective monograph, where detailed research by scholars from different countries is presented, may be mentioned here «A preliminary approach to the economy of the Bosphoran Kingdom under the Spartokids: foreign trade».

Due to difficulties with the numismatic research of the Bosphoran Kingdom which owned the lands of contemporary Russia and Ukraine, French scholars have solidly enriched the economic history of the Kingdom of the Bosphorus from the period of the Kingdom of Pontus and the Empire of Rome, when the Kingdom of the Bosphorus became a part of the monetary circulation of the West. For example, a solid work «UNE KOINE PONTIQUE: cites grecques, indigènes sociétés et world empires on the northern coast of the Black Sea» by Alain Bresson, Askold Ivantchik and Jean-Louis Ferrary, which was published in 2007 at Bordeaux - a result of long researches in intersections of methods of some related disciplines - the trend of end of XX century. Originally part of other disciplines, numismatics emerged as a distinct science only at the end of the 19th century.

Therefore, any part of numismatics is naturally studied with a cross-method, based on different sources of knowledge. Modern scientific innovations were formed in numismatics in the 20th century. The coins of the Bosphorus Kingdom are increasingly interesting for scientists and investors.

French literature holds particular importance for the study of monetary circulation in the Bosphoran Kingdom, especially when considering France's colonial policy and the immense numismatic material available for research after the Napoleonic wars, during which Paris possessed the world's largest coin collection.

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