

NEW SILVER LATE ROMAN COIN: HEAVY MILIARENSE OF AELIA EUDOCIA FROM *NICOPOLIS AD NESTUM*

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Resumen

Estudio de una nueva miliarense emitida por Aelia Eudocia con motivo de la celebración por el casamiento de su hija Licinia con Valentiniano III. La moneda fue hallada en *Nicopolis ad Nestum*, ciudad romana en ruinas de la provincia de Tracia, cerca del moderno pueblo de Garmen, en la margen izquierda del río Mesta, en Bulgaria. El objetivo particular de dicha rara emisión fue promover la imagen de la emperatriz-madre en las provincias occidentales. Esto fue determinante para preferir las monedas grandes y pesadas de plata.

PALABRAS CLAVE:

Abstract

I study a new heavy miliarense issued by Aelia Eudocia in celebration of the wedding of her daughter Licinia with Valentinian III. The coin was found in *Nicopolis ad Nestum*, a ruined Roman town of the province of Thracia (Thrace), near to the modern village of Garmen on the left bank of the Mesta river, in Bulgaria. The particular aim was to promote the image of the empress-mother in the western provinces. This determined the preference of large and heavy silver coins.

KEYWORDS: Aelia Eudocia, Heavy Miliarense, Unpublished, Monetary Policy

Among the finds discovered during regular archaeological excavations of the Roman and Medieval town of Nicopolis ad Nestum in 2013, there is a rare coin. It belongs to Augusta Aelia Eudocia (423-460 AD), wife of emperor Theodosius II (408-450 AD). Coinage by royal ladies is considered quite uncommon. In this particular case the find is of special interest, as it combines silver coinage, which is scarce in the Eastern Roman Empire, with high nominal value.

The question of silver coinage during the 5th century AD provokes much discussion. The whole group, known to specialists, is considered extremely rare. Such finds are practically missing from the current Bulgarian territories, which were controlled by Constantinople. At this stage, the reasons for this phenomenon remain unclear¹. In Western Europe and Britannia the circulation is prolific, but the deposition of large coin hoards in these areas ended around 410 AD.² F. Grierson even states that:

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¹ Gold in 4th century AD became the most valuable good in the Eastern Roman Empire. Its value is partially inherent, based on its scarcity, but primarily on its ideological and cultural implications of being pure and incorruptible, which makes it an attribute of the holy nature of the emperor. (MacMullen R. 1988, 96-119).

² The circulation of silver coins in the Balkan Peninsula stops at the end of the 4th century AD. Most common are coins of Constantius II, discovered primarily in Dobrudzha, Oltenia, Vlahia and Moldova. (Moisil D. 2002, 5). The only exceptions are the siliquae found as burial goods in the necropolises of Augusta Traiana (14 siliquae) and Shipka-Sheynovo (3 siliquae). (Минкова М. 2008, 136-139; Божкова

“Silver coin hoards are practically non-existent in the Eastern Roman Empire”. But in order to get a clearer understanding, we need to make a short review of the leading hypotheses on the bimetal standard adopted during the Late Antiquity.

Some scientists interpret the gold coins’ domination as main currency at the time as follows: “It seems logical in this situation that according to some authors the transition in payment of taxes from goods to money led to significant increase in the usage of gold” (Владимирова-Аладжова Д. 2003, 85). Following that logic, there was no economic obstacle to continue the traditions of the Principate, and even the supremacy of the silver standard would have been facilitated. The answer lies in the economic policy followed by the Empire at that time. It brings forward one hypothesis that still does not have sufficient support in numismatic circles. It states that during the reign of Theodosius II there is a well-organized tax collection system. It does not allow quantitative accumulation of high-value capitals by the population. The geographical distribution of the coin finds is a relevant argument in support of that assumption. The archaeological evidence discussed in numerous publications shows that the majority of the large coin hoards are discovered outside of the imperial borders. The royal administration tried to monopolize the access to precious metals, especially gold³. To that end, only coins with very low and very high nominal values were allowed to circulate in the market. This is supported by a decree of 395 AD, which forbade the minting of bronze nominal AE2 and by 410 AD only the smallest nominal AE4, weighing about 1 gram, was still in circulation.⁴ Thus the administration aimed to decrease the production costs and the usage of precious metals. We cannot speak of inflation in the economic sense of the word, since in the sources there is no mention of price increase.

But for the second half of the 5th century the facts repudiate this hypothesis as massive wealth was accumulated in Justinian’s treasury.⁵ This period seems to end with the death of Theodosius II in the middle of the century. The economic policy of Theodosius II led to significant and lasting decrease in prices of goods and services. The monetary base came out insufficient and the supply exceeded the demand. The goods and services became increasingly cheaper which led to lower estimates for tax collection by the imperial treasury. The process is characterized by the term deflation. In historical sources these events are commented as a result of the Hun invasions. The correlation is described by Priscus in his “History of Byzantium”. In a few short sentences it states: “The emperor (Theodosius II) forced everyone to pay a tax for the Huns. The senators had to pay for their titles. Some once wealthy citizens were compelled to sell their wives’ jewelry and relics. Hunger and misery led a lot of people to suicide”. In order to ease the situation Marcian (450-457 AD) rescinded some of the taxes, which proved so positive, that during Anastasius the tax *Collatio Iustralis* (chysargyron) was abolished. The tax was such a burden on trade in the Eastern Empire that after it was abandoned, the people of the city of Edessa celebrated with a week of festivities.

B. 1998, 1, 56-61). The circulation in Britannia is commented by Grierson and Mays (Grierson, Mays 1992: 17).

³ A special law instituted by Valentinian I, Valens and Gratian in 374-375 AD, which is included in the Codex Justinianus and in “Basilika” by Leo VI (886-912 AD), forbids private individuals to export gold outside Byzantium (Hendy, 1985, 257).

⁴ Grierson, Mays 1992: Op. cit. p. 40

⁵ Jones. R, Money and government in the Roman Empire, Cambridge UP. I, 1994, 20-47.

As was already mentioned, this pattern is supported by the number and the composition of the coin finds in the current Bulgarian lands.⁶ If the population had spare finances, the number and the size of the coin hoards would have been comparable to that during the Gothic and Avar invasions. The shortage of monetary assets is illustrated also by the composition of the hoards. A good example is the find from Selanovtsi (in the region of Oriyahovo), which consists of small bronze coins, as the prevailing percentage was struck under Theodosius II. It also includes 15 fragmented coins – halves and quarters (ИБАИ. 1937, 321). Fragmented coins are a common find during archaeological excavations of major town centers. They are primarily of the forbidden nominal AE3, which the population still attempted to use. The facts stated above cannot fully reveal the fiscal policies of the government in the 5th century, but constitute a good precedent, worth of a further extensive investigation. It can hypothetically be assumed that the monetary system did not include coins with intermediate nominal values. Thus the circulation of silver coins was practically discontinued.

Further support for this hypothesis is found in the “Book of the Prefect”, describing the control over the silver coinage. Part of the obligations of the *trapezit*⁷ included control over the quality and exchange of the coins. Curious detail is the difference in the requirements for gold and silver coins. The gold coins were deemed of full value if they were not deformed, fit the standard, and their weight was not reduced, which means that they were not debased. The *trapezit* could test the shape, the quality of the metal and the weight of the coins. As for the silver coins, they were deemed of full value if there were no deformations and they displayed the image of the emperor. The official was not required to test the quality of the silver or weigh the coins (Сюзюмова. 1962, 145-146). This clearly shows that silver coins were not a fiscal priority and their importance for the local market was marginal. The imperial mint had a legal right to strike coins with reduced weight or lower-grade silver in order to realize minimal losses when was forced to pay reparations to political or ethnic unions which traditionally used the silver standard.

Another suggestion states that silver mines were exhausted in the Late Antiquity, which led to reduction of the silver coinage. Rebuttal of that theory is found once again in historical sources. Priscus writes that during the symposia organized by Attila, the dishes were served in silverware, presented to him by the emperor (Blockley. 1983, 2.267, 285). In his survey on byzantine silverware, M. Mango also does not mention such shortage during the 5th century (Mango. 2007, 127-161). No cataclysmic events in the extraction of precious metals are recorded during the Late Antiquity and Early Byzantine period. There is even a slight increase (Matschke. 2001, 118-125). Therefore this theory can be safely rejected.

The exact weight and the grade of the alloy were traditionally stamped on the silverware by the emperor's administration. The difference in the approach is due to its function as bonuses for the army (*largitio, donativa*).⁸ A concrete example comes from

⁶ Out of the 45 collective coin finds in the Danube provinces, 9 are golden (consisting of 10 to 15 old solidi), which means that population was not capable of accumulation of considerable wealth. (Аладжова Д, 2003, 84). The find of Abritus is the only exception, as its average weight is equivalent to 11.5 librae. Probably it was intended for reparations for the barbarians.

⁷ *Trapezit* is an administrative title during the Late Antiquity and the Early Byzantine Empire. The term originates from the Greek word “*trapeza*”, which meant a small table where the *trapezits* exchanged coins. Part of the obligations of the official was to check the mintage in circulation in the market.

⁸ Думанов Б. 2008, Възпоменателните съдове на император Лициний и „Войната на императорите и образите“ от ранния IV в., в Югоизточна Европа през античността – V в. пр. хр. – началото на VII в. сл. хр. STUDIA IN HONOREM ALEKSANDRAE DIMITROVA-MILCHEVA, НАИМ-БАН.2008, 480-492.

historical sources dating to the beginning of the 5th century: the soldiers received supplementary payment amounting to 5 solidi and half a kilogram of silver (probably donatives) in celebration of the emperor's coronation (Guest. 2005, 24-25; MacMullen. 1988, 108-127). This tradition was largely abandoned by the time of Theodosius II. The most famous vessel of the period is the Missorium of Theodosius I (379-395 AD), which was made in 388-389 AD for his decennalia (Brenk. 1977, 78-130). The only exceptions were the presents for the barbarians, mentioned in the sources.

The data from Bulgaria confirm the lack of silver coins from the 5th century, as there are only three well-dated coins from the funds of the Archaeological museum in Sofia (НАИМ-БАН) – one light miliarense and two siliquae (Аладжова. 2013, 490). As for the nominal values, the silver coinage in circulation during the 5th century was comprised entirely of miliarenzia and siliquae. Only “miliarense” is mentioned in the historical sources, while “siliqua” is used as a definition for quantity of coins (Grierson, Mays.1992, 35; Carson, Kent and Burnett.1994, 15).⁹ Various fractions existed – heavy miliarense – 5.40 gr. (1/60 lb.); light miliarense – 4.50 gr. (1/72 lb.); heavy siliqua – 3.38 gr. (1/96 lb.); siliqua – 2.25 gr. (1/144 lb.) and half siliqua – 1.13 gr. (1/288 lb.).

It's worth mentioning that the weight of the roman libra was reduced on several occasions. At the end of the 4th and the beginning of the 5th centuries it already weighed 322.6 gr. This number is estimated based on the study of collective finds, which were deposited between 380 AD and 500 AD, mainly in Central and Western Europe¹⁰.



Fig. 1: Heavy miliarense of Augusta Aelia Eudocia from *Nicopolis ad Nestum*.

⁹ The stated facts explain to a great extent the lack of the term “siliqua” in the sources.

¹⁰ Priscus describes the payment of reparations to the Huns in accordance with the treaties from 434-447 AD. The amount of the sums systematically increased to 350, 700 and 2100 pounds. (Blockley R. C. 1983, 23.1; 23.2 и 9.1.) It's interesting that according to the treaties and the collective finds, the sums had been measured in pounds of gold, and its fractions, rather than in number of coins. Within the Empire the payments were carried out mainly in coins (Guest P. 2008, 303-304). The weight of the gold and silver coins was controlled by *Comes Sacrarum Largitionum*. Information about that office is carried in the medieval copies of *Notitia Dignitatum*. (Guest P. 2005, 22–26; Hendy M. 1985 . 386–395). *Comes Sacrarum Largitionum* was the keeper of the government treasury, one of the highest tax authority positions in Late Antiquity and Early Byzantium. It was concerned with the financial sectors, including coinage. It is last mentioned during the reign of Phokas (602-610 AD). Later its functions were inherited by the sakelarion and the logothetis of the genikonas (Kazhdan.1991, 486).

Jones. R, Money and government in the Roman Empire, Cambridge UP. I, 1994, 20-47.

The coin of Aelia Eudocia, which is the main subject of the current article, has a nominal value of a heavy miliarensis, weight of 5.55 gr, diameter of 23.5-24.0 mm and thickness of 1,5 mm.

Obverse: AELEVDO CIAAVG. Circular inscription, with a lightly stamped circle on the periphery. Bust to the right, as the body is turned $\frac{3}{4}$ towards the observer. Dressed in a tunic with rich decoration on the right sleeve – discernible cross surrounded by concentric layers of pearls. A draped cloak (paludamentum), covering the left shoulder, pinned at the right shoulder by a big circular brooch adorned with pearls. On the neck a pearl necklace. Diadem with rectangular segments, decorated with pearl circles. Behind the head 3 perpendulas, same as on the brooch.

Reverse: No inscription. Heavy equidistant cross shaped by small pearls, in a wreath of laurels, with leaves in 3 rows. Decoration by a circular brooch above the cross in the center. In the exergue – CONS, with an eight-pointed star. Circle on the periphery with remnants of granulation.

The real name of Aelia Eudocia is Atenaise, daughter of Leontius, rhetoric and philosophy teacher from Athens, and Antiocheia before that. She was noticed by Pulcheria, when she came to Constantinople in 420 AD to settle a personal matter. Her beauty and intellect were highly appreciated and even the fact that she was not a Christian, did not impede Pulcheria's ambitions to incorporate her in the court. Baptized and married to Theodosius II in 421 AD, on the 2nd of January 423 AD Atenaise received the title Augusta, traditionally after she produced an heir to the throne. Eudocia gave birth to a daughter – Licinia Eudoxia, named after her grandmother Eudoxia, wife of emperor Arcadius. Between 420 AD and 430 AD – according to some researchers even till 440 AD – Eudocia was a powerful influence in court. After 438 AD she retired from public duty and in 440 AD left for Jerusalem. She lost Theodosius's confidence due to Pulcheria's schemes. They led to suspicions of adultery and her exile in 442 AD. She died in 460 AD in Jerusalem. Eudocia was an extremely devoted Christian and sponsored the construction of churches in Antiocheia and Jerusalem (Grierson, Mays. 1992, 155-156).

The image of the empress is treated with sumptuousness in the garments and jewelry, typical for the imperial couples in 4th-5th century AD. The mosaic portrait of Theodora from San Vitale is a close iconographic parallel. The intricate hairstyle and the imperial insignia resemble those on the statue of Aelia Flacilla and on the Missorium of Theodosius I. Pearls were reserved for the wives of the emperors (the same goes also for the Diptych of Ariadne – fig. 2).

D. Aladzhova points that the images of the empresses from the 5th century AD follow the aesthetic criteria of the period. It's hard to make out individual features. But at the same time this is compensated by the details of the attire, the hairstyle and the accompanying attributes. Their images were ideological medium exploited by the imperial institution. Put on coinage, the portraits were symbols of the government and demonstrated its prosperity. As for the variations in the images on the obverses and the reverses of the coins, they were a product of the political situation, but also aimed to explicate the way the government works. This defines them as objects with dual function – to inform of the policies of the government and be its advocate at the same time (Аладжова. 2013, 579).

The adherence to the same iconographic standards hampers the explicit determination of the occasion for the issuing of this piece and its purpose. There is no epigraphic information on the face of the coin regarding any concrete act or decree of the imperial family. Numismatic specialists lean towards the ceremony at which Eudocia received the title Augusta, after giving birth to an heir (January 423 AD)

(Grierson, Mays. 1992). In such cases small series of representative coins were issued (though there's no actual proof so far). The usage of uncommon material for the period could suggest a ritual purpose with pre-Christian roots. Probably the coins were given away to the public taking part in the ritual or to the entourage of the imperial couple. The heavy weight of the coin supports such interpretation. This indicates that the coin must have been struck after January 423 AD. But the heavy miliarensis of Pulcheria (fig. 3) contradicts this theory. The iconography on the coin of the sister of Theodosius II, and wife of his successor Marcian, is identical with one exception – the Chi-Rho on the reverse. Christian symbols on coins undoubtedly propagandize the official religion. As was already mentioned, coins had not only financial, but also political role. Pulcheria was likewise a very devoted Christian and even insisted on being compared with Virgin Mary. She took a vow of chastity, which she kept even after her marriage. In that respect, it's an important fact that she produced no heir to the throne. This must steer the search in another direction.



Fig. 2: Above: Statue of Aelia Flacilla. Portrait of Theodosius I.
Below: Diptych of Ariadne (500-520 AD) after (Weitzmann. 1978, pl. XXXII, p. 71, 31).

Since coinage reflects the time and society, I would suggest another high-profile event that took place in 437 AD – the marriage of Valentinian III, ruler of the Western Roman Empire, and the only heiress to the throne of the Eastern Empire – the daughter of Theodosius II and Eudocia – Licinia Eudoxia. A series of unprecedented coins were struck for the occasion. Particular examples are the so-called wedding solidi. In the period of transition between paganism and Christianity, and between Rome and Byzantium, the wedding memorial solidi confirmed the authority of the emperor, given to him by God, but at the same time demonstrated the importance and prestige of the empress and her role in government and religious matters. The expanded role of these gold coins was dictated by the political situation at a time in which the consolidation of the emperor's power and the enforcement of the Christian philosophy were of paramount importance. The example was followed subsequently by Marcian and Pulcheria, and Anastasius and Ariadne (Аладжова. 2014, 155-162). This wedding was no ordinary wedding. Since there was no male heir to the East, the Empire was going to be united after the death of Theodosius II. The eagerly awaited event in the West was celebrated by another memorial coin – light miliarensis of Licinia Eudoxia, seated on a throne, flanked by two crosses, undoubtedly symbolizing the two halves of the Roman Empire (fig. 4).

My personal opinion is that the coin of Aelia Eudocia was issued in celebration of the wedding of her daughter Licinia to Valentinian III. The particular aim was to promote the image of the empress-mother in the western provinces. This determined the preference of large and heavy silver coins.

The whole group of miliarensia from that period is extremely rare in terms of nominal values and images presenting the influence of the royal ladies closest to Theodosius II. Curious are also the abbreviations of the mintmarks on the coins from the 5th century: CONS*, CONS, CON*, CON and COM. Research shows that abbreviations were used in the Western Roman Empire until the rule of Valentinian III¹¹. The coin in question is likely minted in Constantinople.

Not a single identical coin was found in scientific literature, despite all the efforts, so it can be categorized as a unique piece. Its condition is reasonably good. There are some superficial burn marks, but the temperature was not high enough to damage its integrity and the details of the images. Only on the obverse there are some small bubbles with low corrosive potency. On the edge it was tested with a sharp blade, probably to establish its authenticity – another proof of the unpopularity of these coins in the East.

The discovery of this piece in archaeological context is particularly important, since it eliminates all the suspicions concerning the authenticity of the other two coins in the group – those of Licinia Eudoxia and Pulcheria (fig. 3) (RIC X, 46)¹².

As for the geography of the find, it can be associated chronologically to a known coin hoard from the 5th century, discovered in the region of Nicopolis (Герасимов. 1937, 322). It consisted of 95 scattered solidi. 30 of them have been studied, including coins by Honorius (1), Theodosius II (24), Valentinian III (2), Pulcheria (1) and Marcian (2). The deposition of the hoard is connected to the Hun invasion in 451 AD, which led to the concealment of a large number of hoards on both sides of Stara planina.

¹¹ Carson, Kent and Burnett 1994, 24-25.

¹² There were serious doubts about the authenticity of the miliarensia from the 5th century. The leading opinion in numismatic literature was that such coins were not struck. Further information about Aelia (Licinia) Eudoxia: A.H.F. Baldwin, Glendining & Co., Auktion 20.-21. November 1969 (London), Nr. 434, und aus Numismatic Fine Arts, Auktion XII (23.-24. März 1983, Beverly Hills), Nr. 487, und aus Slg. McLendon, Christie's, Auktion 12. Juni 1993 (New York), Nr. 221.

It's likely that they affected not only the hinterland, but also the town itself. Till the 5th century Nicopolis ad Nestum was an important center in the structure of the Eastern Empire. Its character, usually described as agricultural, does not eliminate the possibility that the local aristocracy had direct contact with the court in Constantinople. Another potential route of origin is through commercial contacts with Thessaloniki. According to the historical sources, after the wedding in Constantinople, the young couple spent the winter there. It's only logical that the geographical proximity allowed for this exceptional numismatic piece to end up in Nicopolis ad Nestum.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3: Heavy miliarensis of Aelia Eudoxia. Heavy miliarensis of Pulcheria. The iconography shows big similarities to the coin of Eudocia. After (Numismatik Lanz München, Auction 100, Lot 651, CONS. RIC 46) (4).



Fig. 4: Light miliarensis of Licinia Eudocia of the type “Empress on throne” (Numismatica Ars Classica NAC AG, Auction 33, Lot 617).

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