

IN WHICH TOWNS WERE COUNTERMARKED THE COINS OF LYSIMACHUS WITH “OWL UPON A LINE, TURNED TO THE LEFT” AND “OWL, TURNED TO THE RIGHT”*

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In his book “The Ancient coins on the Balkan Peninsula and the coins of the Bulgarian tsars”, N. Mušmov describes a coin of Bysanthe, countermarked with the representation of an owl¹. By reason of the book’s character, the author does not give his opinion as to which town the coin was countermarked in. In 1946, T. Gerasimov published two bronze coins, countermarked with an owl. One of them belongs to the issues of Lysimachus, with the type “Head of Athena turned to the right/leaping lion, to the right”, with a countermark “Owl upon a line, to the left”². The second coin is attributed to Bysanthe and it is countermarked with “Owl turned to the right”³. According to T. Gerasimov’s point of view, both coins were countermarked with the countermark of Bysanthe – “an owl”⁴.

It is not certain whether N. Mušmov and T. Gerasimov have used one and the same countermarked coin of Bysantium or it is a matter of two separate specimens. The second conjecture appears more likely since without citing N. Mušmov’s book, T. Gerasimov writes that we can distinguish both local and foreign coins, countermarked in the mint of Bysanthe. So far this supposition has been left undoubted and beyond suspicion⁵. In 1998, W. Stancomb published two more Lysimachus coins with the countermark “Owl upon a line, to the left”. His standpoint is that this countermark was stamped in Agathopolis (present-day Black Sea town of Achtopolis, in south-east Bulgaria) and not in Bysanthe⁶. A year later, S. Topalov published another bronze coin of Lysimachus, countermarked with “Owl upon a line, to the left”⁷. He adduces his own arguments to contest T. Gerasimov’s judgement that it is a countermark of Bysanthe and assumes it was not used in the town where were struck bronze coins of the type “Male juvenile head, bound with a fillet (taenia) / owl upon a spear head, to the right”⁸. Despite the common aspects of his hypothesis with that of W. Stancomb, he does not state explicitly and emphasised with a firm stand that the countermarking was implemented in Agathopolis. Yet he

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¹ N. Mušmov, *Antičnite moneti na Balkanskija poluostrvo i monetite na bulgarskite care*, Sofia, 1912, p. 177, no 3198.

² T. Gerasimov, *Les monnaies antiques contermarquées de la Moesia Inférieure et de la Thrace* (in Bulgarian with summary in French), – *IBAI*, 15, 1946, p. 58, fig. 28, no 13, p. 70.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 58, fig. 28, no 12, p. 70.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 70.

⁵ E. Schönert-Geiss, *Griechisches Münzwerk. Die münzprägung von Bisanthe, Dikaia, Selymbria*, Berlin, 1977, p. 5; J. Jouroukova, *Monetite na trakijskite plemena i vladeteli*, Sofia, 1992, p. 145.

⁶ W. Stancomb, *Agathopolis: a Mint on the Black Sea Coast*, – In: *Studies in Greek Numismatic in Memory of Martin Jesop Price*, London, 1998, pp. 337, Pl. 69, no 5-6; *SNG XI. The William Stancomb Collection of Coins of the Black Sea Region*, The British Academy, Oxford, 2000, Pl. II, no 19-21.

⁷ S. Topalov, *Coins with the Legend ΑΓΑΘΟ, ΑΓΑΘ, ΑΓΑ, Monogram Based on the Letters ΑΓ, as Well as a Coin with Countermark “Owlet on the tip of a Spear” from a Private Collection* (in Bulgarian with summary in English), – *Annali*, vol. 1-4, Sofia, 1999, pp. 63-64, fig. 1-2.

⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 65-68.

takes the view that the mint which used the countermark with an owl-image has to be looked for in the region of the Black Sea coast⁹.

I consider it necessary to make some specifications before expressing my personal standpoint regarding the location of the coins' countermarking. According to me there are two separate countermarks with an owl-image, used at one and the same period of time but at two different mints. The first one is "Owl upon a line, turned to the left" and the second is "Owl, turned to the right". The two countermarks will be discussed separately with respect to their peculiarities and the towns where they were stamped. First, I will dwell upon the countermark "Owl upon a line, to the left", since it is used for countermarking the majority – five of all seven – coins, bearing the image of an owl and published till now.

I do not think it will be of any use to repeat the arguments used by W. Stancomb and S. Topalov to confute T. Gerasimov's opinion that the countermark "Owl upon a line, to the left" was stamped in Bysanthe. They are explained convincingly enough and I endorse them completely. On the other hand, I find a number of reasons to disagree with W. Stancomb's notion that that this countermark was used in Agathopolis. The supposition that this countermark is Agathopolitan is based on the presumption that it was stamped in the same town where coins of the type "Male juvenile head were struck, bound with a fillet / owl upon a spear head, to the right"¹⁰. The view that their striking was implemented precisely in the Black Sea town of Agathopolis, which has recently gained ground¹¹, leads to the conclusion that all "owl countermarks" had been stamped in the mint of the very same town¹². So far, however, this assumption remains unverified. There even exists no tangible evidence that in the Hellenistic age Agathopolis had a mint. As far as I am informed not a single coin of the type "Male juvenile head, bound with a fillet / owl upon a spear head, to the right" was found either on location of the town or in its vicinity¹³. This fact casts suspicion on the presupposed striking of the coins in the Agathopolis mint; moreover it is a matter of common knowledge that the civic bronze coins had primarily local significance. Another disturbing fact that I feel obliged to mention, is that the town was not referred to as Agathopolis earlier than the 10th century AD¹⁴. It is not established when it got its name and the only thing we can be certain about is that at the beginning of 2nd century the settlement was recorded as Auleuteichos by Flavius Arrianus¹⁵. My doubts that the countermarking of coins with the image of an "Owl upon a line, to the left" was done in Agathopolis or rather in the Hellenistic settlement, located beneath the mediaeval town known by that name, arouse mostly from the fact that for the time being we are not familiar with any Lysimachus coins, stamped with this countermark, to be found in the region of the town of Achtopol. S. Topalov thinks that the Lysimachus coin published by T. Gerasimov, countermarked

⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 67-68.

¹⁰ W. Stancomb, *op. cit.*, p. 337; S. Topalov, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

¹¹ E. Vapheus, *Ἱστορία τῆς Ἀγαθουπόλεως καὶ Βορειοατολικῆς Θράκης*, New York, 1948, pp. 64-66; Sv. Ganeva, A. Koičev, B. Azmanov, V. Mutafov, *Achtopol* (in Bulgarian), Sofia, 1990, pp. 9-10; J. Jouroukova, *Agathopolis – d'après les données épigraphiques et numismatiques*, – In: *3rd International Symposium "Cabyle"*, *Studies on Settlement Life in Ancient Thrace*, Jambol, 1994, p. 262; J. Jouroukova, *Une nouvelle monnaie d'Agathopolis*, – *SCN*, 11, 1995 (1997), p. 23–27; B. Azmanov, *Historical and Archaeological Data on Ancient Achtopol* (in Bulgarian with summary in English), – *Annali*, vol. 1-4, Sofia, 1997, pp. 27-29, fig. 5; W. Stancomb, *op. cit.*, p. 336-337; *SNG XI*, Pl. II, no18.

¹² W. Stancomb, *op. cit.*, p. 337.

¹³ L. Robert, *Les inscriptions grecques de Bulgarie*, – *Révue de philologie*, 33, 1959, p. 176; L. Lazarov, *Encore une hypothèse sur les monnaies avec légende ΑΓΑΘΟ* (in Bulgarian with summary in French), – *Studia Numismatica*, 2, 1996, p. 21, foot-note no 25; B. Azmanov, *op. cit.*, p. 29; S. Topalov, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

¹⁴ L. Robert, *op. cit.*, p. 172; I. Yordanov, A. Koičev, V. Mutafov, *The Mediaeval Achtopol (6th-12th c.) According to Numismatics and Sigillography Data* (in Bulgarian), – *Numismatica et Sphragistica*, 5, 1998, 2, p. 68.

¹⁵ L. Robert, *op. cit.*, p. 175, not. 7; L. Lazarov, *Sur le monnayage D'Adaeos* (in Bulgarian with summary in French), – *Studia Numismatica*, 2, 1996, p. 57; B. Azmanov, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

with “Owl upon a line, to the left” and that of Bysanthe, countermarked with “Owl, to the right”, were discovered in Aquae Calidae¹⁶. Even if it is really so, their incidental falling into the catchments area of today’s Burgas mineral baths cannot be used as an argument that the town (or towns), which had the owl-image countermark was/were situated near the big mineral spring. Hundreds of coins, struck in great quantities in the civic mints of Lower Moesia, Thrace, Macedonia and Asia Minor, as well as coins of Thracian, Macedonian and Scythian rulers were found side by side in the same reservoir¹⁷.

It is surprising that not all Lysimachus coins countermarked with “Owl upon a line, to the left” originate from south-east Thrace as it should be expected if they were countermarked in Agathopolis, but from the lands of the Getae. W. Stancomb points out that two of the coins published by him were found in Dobrudja¹⁸, while the coin from S. Topalov’s personal collection was found somewhere in the Varna district¹⁹. Yet another Lysimachus coin countermarked with “Owl upon a line, to the left”, which is kept in the numismatic collection of the Varna museum, and detailed further on in this study, comes from south Dobrudja, too.

In spite of all arguments against the defining of the countermark “Owl upon a line, to the left” as Bysanthe or Agathopolitan, until recently we couldn’t propose a substantiated attitude as to which Black Sea town the countermarking might be done in. One of the two Lysimachus coins, which recently joined the collection of the Varna Museum, may to a large extent contribute to the clarification of the matter.

It can be described as follows:

Obverse side: Head of Athena (?), to the right. Only part of the face and some locks of hair hanging out of the helmet, are visible. An elliptical countermark of the type “ΙΕΤΠΙ Eagle upon a dolphin” is stamped over the head. The countermark belongs to Istrus - an antique town, situated near the Danube estuary (present-day village of Istrus, Romania). A second countermark – “Owl upon a line, to the left” – is stamped above the first one. The owl-image countermark is slightly overlapping the Istrum countermark.

Reverse side: The image and the inscription are erased. Only one hind leg of the lion is discernable.

Weight: 4,26 g; diameter: 23,5/22 mm; inv. N I 4684. (Fig. 1)

The coin was unearthed in the south-west part of Dobrič district, south Dobrudja (north-east Bulgaria).

This coin provides very interesting information about the countermark “Owl upon a line, to the left”. So far it is the only coin which has a second easily definable countermark besides the owl-image one. The overlapping of the two countermarks is a certain proof that the “owl countermark” was stamped after the coin had already been countermarked in Istrus. Its discovery in south Dobrudja indicates the ultimate point reached by the coin in its transitional movement from the north to the south. It is preposterous to assume that after it had been countermarked in Istrus, travelled almost 400 km southwards and got incidentally into Agathopolis, it was countermarked again and taken back to the north once more. Such long-distance migrations are difficult to prove even for gold or silver coins, while for bronze ones, which are strongly worn-out and countermarked again – as is the case – they are simply unverifiable. I am therefore inclined to think that the coin got the countermark with an owl-

¹⁶ S. Topalov, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

¹⁷ B. Filov, *Archäologische Funde. Bulgarien. 1910*, – *Archäologischer Anzeiger*, 26, 1911, pp. 350-356; T. Gerasimov, *op. cit.*, p. 52; I. Karajotov, P. Kiačkina, K. Gospodinov, *Bourgas. Večnoto pristanište*, Burgas, 2000, pp. 29-32.

¹⁸ W. Stancomb, *op. cit.*, p. 337, Pl. 69, 5-6.

¹⁹ S. Topalov, *op. cit.*, p.64.

image, turned to the left, in the mint of one of the Greek poleis, situated on the Black Sea Dobrudja coast between the towns of Istrus and Odessos (present-day Varna, Bulgaria).

Between Istrus and Odessos were situated three towns, which used to strike coins in the Hellenistic period. These are namely Tomis (present-day Constantza in Romania), Callatis (present-day Mangalia in Romania) and Dionysopolis (present-day Balčik in Bulgaria). Of all three only one – Tomis – shows evidence of striking bronze coins with an owl-image on the reverse²⁰. As a matter of fact, Tomis is the only West-Pontic town which had a monetary issue with an owl-image²¹. The supplement of this fact to the already discussed evidence coming from the Lysimachus coin with a double countermarking and the whereabouts of the countermarked coins from W. Stancomb and S. Topalov's collections, gives a well-grounded reason to maintain that it is precisely the civic mint of Tomis that used the countermark "Owl upon a line, to the left".

The Varna Archaeological museum is in possession of one more Lysimachus coin with an owl countermark. What follows is its description.

Obverse side: Head of Athena, to the right; with a round countermark of an owl, also to the right, stamped above the head.

Reverse side: Leaping lion, to the right, with a spear head beneath.

Weight: 5.19 g; diameter: 20 mm; inv. N I 4683. (Fig. 2)

Although we have no available data about its exact location, according to its last owner's testimony, the coin was acquired in Burgas and it is rather likely to have originated from the same region.

This coin is actually the third specimen that came to my knowledge, countermarked with a turned to the right owl. It arise certain questions but none can be answered unambiguously at present. If we assume that the Bysanthe coins described by N. Mušmov and T. Gerasimov and the presently published coin of Lysimachus were countermarked at one and the same place and time, it could turn out that the right-turned owl-image countermark is a later invention than the left-turned-owl countermark. All familiar coins countermarked with "Owl upon a line, to the left" belong to Lysimachus, so it is logical to conclude that the countermarking was done immediately after Lysimachus' death.

The countermarks with "Owl, turned to the right" differ in this respect. Two of the three familiar coins bearing this countermark are of Bysanthe and belong to a type about which E. Schönert-Geiss presumes to have been struck after Lysimachus' death²². This calls forth the inference that these coins should have been countermarked a few years later as compared to the Lysimachus coins, countermarked with "Owl upon a line, to the left". On the other hand, if the right-turned-owl countermark was stamped immediately after Lysimachus death, which is prompted by the Lysimachus coin of the Varna Museum, we ought to assume that part of the bronze coins of Bysanthe falling into the type "Head of Athena / owl with gathered wings, to the right" were struck at the time when Lysimachus was still alive.

²⁰ B. Pick, K. Regling, *Die Antiken Münzen von Dacien und Moesien*, Berlin, 1910, p. 645, no 2458, Pl. V, no 16.

²¹ According to W. Stancomb, the coins of the type "Head of Athena, to the right / owl to the right, with a facing head, letter abbreviation - TO - and a monogram" next to it, which B. Pick and N. Moušmov define as Tomitan, could be struck in Agathopolis. About his standpoint see W. Stancomb, *op. cit.*, p. 337, footnote no 9. This supposition is hardly possible because of the existing coins defined positively as struck in Tomis, which bear the same letter abbreviation and the same monogram. For them see B. Pick, K. Regling, *op. cit.*, p. 644, no 2453.

²² E. Schönert-Geiss, *op. cit.*, p. 4-5.

Another disputable aspect is the place where the right-turned-owl countermarks were stamped. From my point of view, we do not currently have at our disposal any substantial arguments that can allow for the defining of the coin as originating from Tomis. There are also no certain data that it was stamped in Agathopolis, since the assertion that this town had a mint in the Hellenistic period appears rather dubious and questionable. Despite the long years of purposeful quest for countermarked coins, until the present moment I am not acquainted with any compact finds of regal or civic coins with the countermark “Owl, turned to the right” on the territory of present-day Bulgaria. Although without the fullest degree of certainty, so far only the coin of the Varna Museum can to be regarded some extent as originating from south-east Thrace. This part of Thrace was the intersecting point of all roads connecting the towns of Pontus Euxinus, Propontis and Aegean and therefore it is not a rare and surprising occasion to find coins struck in Thracian Chersonese and Asia Minor in this region.

Due to the lack of more reliable evidence about coins countermarked with “Owl, turned to the right”, I will refrain from any conclusive remarks about the mint where this countermark was stamped, although I am inclined to think that it has to be searched for either in Thracian Chersonese or somewhere in Asia Minor. We can on no account ignore the fact that the familiar civic coins, countermarked with “Owl, turned to the right” are of Bysanthe. This is a significant indication that it was probably this very town which used the right-turned-owl countermark. According to me it seems most logical to assume that this countermark was stamped either in Bysanthe or in Ealeus²³, though we cannot disregard the possibility that it might be of Sygeon, Adramyteum, Miletopolis or Antiochia of the Carrians²⁴. The well-known countermarks with an owl-image, used in Roman times by the towns of Parium, Illium and Priene²⁵ can be pointed out in support of the possibility that the discussed countermark was stamped in some of the Asia Minor towns. So far, however, I consider most plausible T. Gerasimov’s viewpoint that the countermark “Owl, turned to the right” was stamped in the mint of Bysanthe.

²³ There were two towns in Thracian Chersonese which struck coins with an owl-image. For them see J. Jouroukova, *Agathopolis ...*, p. 262, not. 12; L. Lazarov, *Encore une hypothese...*, p. 27, 33, foot-note no 63.

²⁴ These were the towns in Asia Minor, which struck coins with an owl-image. For them see L. Robert, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

²⁵ C. Howgego, *Greek Imperial Countermarks. Studies in the Provincial Coinage of the Roman Empire*, London, 1985, pp. 170-171, no 345-349, Pl. 14, no 345-348.



Fig. 1



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 2