

Theriac Lids from the National  
History Museum of Romania Collections

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Abstract

In this paper, the author discusses three theriac capsules discovered in Dobroudja and listed in the National History Museum of Romania's collections. Such pieces have been discovered in recent years in Constanța, Mangalia, Silistra, Isaccea, Târgușor-Ester, Orheiul Vechi, Brăila and also in Bulgaria. Two of the capsules presented in the paper were found in Constanța and the third one was most likely discovered around Silistra.

The capsules from Constanța are local, south-European, copies of the Venetian pharmacy Testa d'Oro (made to advertise their own recipes). The third capsule is also a copy, most likely of the Cedro Imperiali pharmacy of Venice.

Key words: theriac, lid, Dobroudja, Silistra, Venice, **Constanța**.

In the last few years (Nicolae 2005 181-184; Căndea 2007 232-335; Custurea 2008 415-418), the discovery and publishing of several theriac capsules in Romania brought once again the attention of the specialists over these artefacts, as well as over **their role in understanding the phenomenon of the miracle medicine, a 'mysterious' elixir** that was in use since the Hellenistic period (for more information about this drug/cure, see: Besciu, Suliman 2007 1-8; **Vătămanu 1967 183-188**; Nicolae 2005 181-184).

The interest in these objects date back to the mid-twentieth century, when a series of papers regarding the discovery of theriac capsules and the use of this medicine among the population of Dobroudja during the Middle Ages were published (Sauciuc-**Săveanu 1943** 1-8; Laurent 1947 205-217, **Vătămanu 1967** 183-188). Until present, 15 theriac lids have been discovered and published on Romanian territory - including the territory between the Prut and Nistru rivers (Sauciuc-**Săveanu 1943** 1-8; Laurent 1947 205-217, **Vătămanu 1967** 183-188; Nicolae 2005 181-184; Căndea 2007 232-335; Custurea 2008 415-418).

The trade with these products spreads a lot during the medieval period, in the Ottoman Empire, and recently many papers about the pieces recovered in Bulgaria and dating back to the 16<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries (Gherasimov 1963 278, fig. 1; Nikolov 2014 105-108; Petrakiev 2015 251-258; Petrakiev 2016 225-234) have been published. An important center from where this elixir came from is Venice, which is the most known exporter of such drugs. A large number of pharmacies have existed – and some still work today in the northern Italian city – including the *Struzzo d'Oro*, *Cedro Imperiale*, *Testa d'Oro* and *Aquila Nera*.

A very widespread phenomenon in the era was the counterfeiting of these drugs. The Balkan area has been sprouted during the Middle Ages by many fakes, due to the fact that these products were very expensive and difficult to obtain. The pieces discovered at Mangalia (Sauciuc-**Săveanu 1943** 1-8) and Târgușor-Ester (Custurea

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2008 nos. 5-6) are just a few of the forgeries discovered in the Balkan area, imitating the Venetian flasks in a very non-accurate way, thus being easily identifiable.

Such pieces have been discovered in Constanța, Mangalia, Silistra, Isaccea, **Târgușor-Ester**, Orheiul Vechi, Brăila, but also on the territory of Bulgaria (Plate 2, fig. 7).

The National History Museum of Romania holds three capsules of theriac, entered at different moments in the inventory of the museum. Two of the pieces (Inv. nos. 131049 and 131050) were part of Major S. Stefan Nicolae's collection and held by the N.H.M.R. from 1977, along with other pieces of the same collection<sup>1</sup>. In the inventory database of the museum, these theriac capsules are recorded erroneously as lead seals. The confusion was due to the fact that they are made of lead, just like the seals that were part of the same collection (Paraschiv-Grigore 2013 165-174). They most likely come from *Tomis*, where the lead seals of the said collection come from, and are most likely random discoveries from 1925s-1930s. The lids are in a very good state of preservation, being easily readable and bearing on them even the years of making. One of the capsules has the year 1603 engraved, and the second capsule is engraved with the year 1608.

Two similar pieces with those held by N.H.M.R. were listed for sale on two internet pages<sup>2</sup> specialized in selling<sup>3</sup> antiques (Plate 1, fig. 4). In the description, it is said that these two are forgeries originating in the Balkan area, where the counterfeiting of these products was frequent. Both pieces have been inscribed with the year 1603 and the inscription reads: TERIACA - FINA - ALLA - TESTA - D'ORO IN VENETZI, hence being forgeries of the product made by the Venetian pharmacy *Testa d'Oro* (Golden Head).

A third terracotta theriac lid that comes from Dobrogea – location unknown – **entered the N.H.M.R.' possession in 2000 and is also listed as a medieval seal**<sup>4</sup>. The error is obviously due to the material it is made of, as well as to the fact that it was donated together with a lead seal of the Legion *XI Claudia*<sup>5</sup>. The association with the **legion's seal, who had its headquarters at *Durostorum***, leads us to believe that the lid comes from Silistra area, an important Ottoman urban settlement during the 16<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Theriac capsules have also been discovered in Bulgaria, south of Silistra, in the village of Sadovo-Sungurlare municipality (Nikolov 2014 105-108), Veliko Tarnovo (Petraiev 2015 251-258) and Ahtopol (Petraiev 2016 225-234). Similar items were **also discovered closer, at Târgușor-Ester in Constanța County** (Custurea 2008 nos. 2, 5, 6.), but also in Isaccea-Tulcea County (Custurea 2008 nos. 1, 3, 4). In contrast to the six **pieces discovered in Târgușor-Ester**, that are in a much better state of preservation, the capsule lid kept at N.H.M.R. (Inv. No 301638) is in a very poor condition, being worn-out, while the inscription being almost totally erased.

The theriac lids presented in this paper can be divided into two categories. The first two capsules are used to seal metal containers (Plate 2, fig. 5), and the third (smaller) capsule was used to seal glass containers (Plate 2, fig. 6). Generally speaking, theriac lids with the diameter around 25 mm were used to seal glass containers, while those with the diameter around 35 mm were used to seal metal containers.

<sup>1</sup> Roman-byzantine lead seals, oil lamps, appliques, rings etc.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.numisbids.com/n.php?p=lot&sid=1315&lot=613> (retrieved 21 March 2018).  
<http://emaxbid.com/view-auctions/catalog/id/40/lot/9108/PLAKETTEN-Fr-uuml-he-Neuzeit-Theriacum-Verschluss-17-18-Jhdt> (retrieved 21 March 2018)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ebay.ie/itm/1603-Dated-Lead-Wine-Or-Medicine-Theriac-Bottle-Seal-/291055951463> (retrieved 21 March 2018)

<sup>4</sup> Donation made by Mr. Cosmin Galeriu in 2000.

<sup>5</sup> A paper concerning this seal is under print (Paraschiv-Grigore 2017 187-190).

Although the number of these artefacts is quite small (until now there are about 25 published pieces), we can say for sure that this miracle medicine was very popular between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries on the territory of the Ottoman Empire, being forged very often. Most of the theriac lids discovered in Dobrogea originate from the *Cedro Imperiale* and *Testa d'Oro* Venetian pharmacies, those being the most counterfeited products. Sometimes the forgeries were so obvious (like the no. 3 in the catalog), that it leads us to think that the market for these products was being so large and the demand for this cure so high, that it led to large-scale counterfeiting.

## CATALOG

### 1. ● TERIACA - FINA – AL(L)A - TESTA - D'ORO IN VENE(TZI)

Theatres mask representing a male face looking to the right. On the left, the letter V and on the right the letter O (both stylized). At the bottom, the year 1603<sup>6</sup>. In a double concentric circular frame, inscription with the name of the pharmacy<sup>7</sup>. The piece is a local Southeast European copy, made to advertise its own products.

Lead, diameter= 34,94 mm; thickness= 7,01 mm; weight=24,25 g, Tomis. Inv. 131049 (Plate 1, fig. 1)

### 2. ● TERIACA - FINA – AL(L)A - TESTA - D'ORO IN VENE(TZI)

Theatres mask representing a male face looking to the right. On the left, the letter V and on the right the letter O (both stylized). The year 1603 inscribed at the bottom. In a double concentric circular frame, inscription with the name of the pharmacy. The piece is a local Southeast European copy, made to advertise its own products.

Lead, diameter= 35,31 mm; thickness= 6,74 mm; weight=22,56 g, Tomis. Inv. 131050 (Plate 1, fig. 2)

### 3. ● TERI.....

Crowned eagle, looking right (heraldic) with stretched wings. Under the wings, two crescent moons with a little dot (possibly the Morning star). The eagle appears to be represented schematically.

Lead, diameter= 24,77 mm; thickness=8,52 mm; weight=10,61 g, Silistra? Inv. 301638 (Plate 1, fig. 3)

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<sup>6</sup> Most likely this is the opening year of the pharmacy.

<sup>7</sup> It is a transcription of the original inscription “VENETZI -TERIACA-FINA-ALLA-TESTA-D'ORO”, but with spelling errors and reversed letters.

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Explanation of the plates/**Explicația planșelor**

Plate 1 – Fig. 1-2 - Theriac lids found in Tomis; Fig. 3 - Theriac lid which was probably found in Silistra; Fig. 4 - Theriac lids listed for sale on internet.

**Planșa 1** – Fig. 1-2 - *Capace de theriac descoperite la Tomis; Fig. 3 - Capac de theriac descoperit probabil la Silistra; Fig. 4 - Capace de theriac scoase la vânzare pe internet.*

Plate 2 – Fig. 5 - Theriac lid for metal container; Fig. 6 - Glass containers sealed; Fig. 7 - Map depicting the settlements where theriac lids were found.

**Planșa 2** – Fig. 5 - *Capac theriac pentru recipiente metalice; Fig. 6 - Recipiente de sticlă sigilate cu capace theriac; Fig. 7 - Hartă marcată cu așezări în care au fost descoperite capace de theriac.*



1.



2.



3.



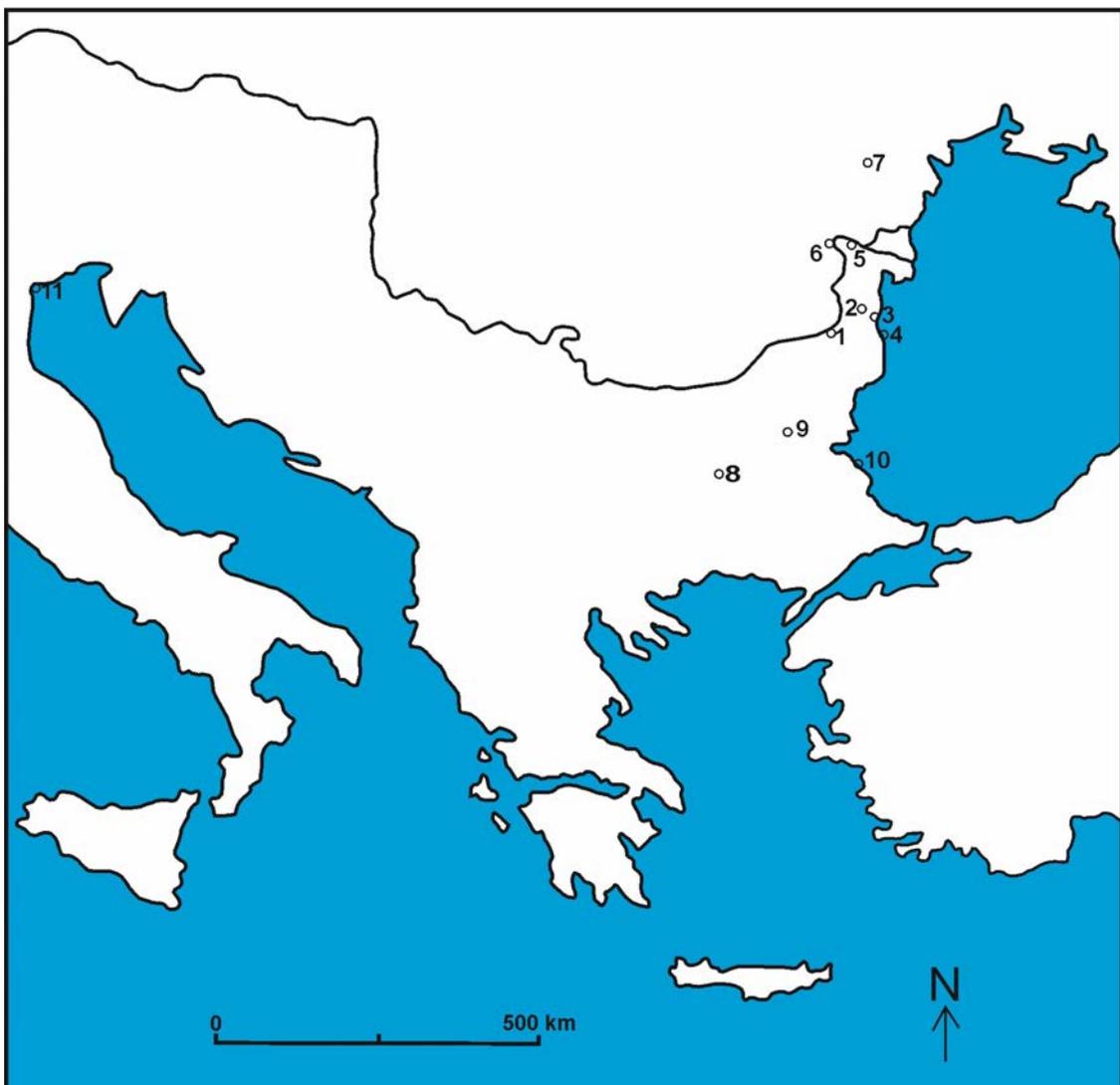
4.

Plate 1



5.

6.



1. Silistra; 2. Târgușor-Ester; 3. Constanța; 4. Mangalia; 5. Isaccea; 6 Brăila;  
7. Orheiul Vechi; 8. Veliko Târnovo; 9. Sadovo; 10. Ahtopol; 11. Venetia

7.

Plate 2