

A STATER OF KING PHARZOIUS FOUND IN SOUTH-EASTERN REGION OF ROMANIA

Ernest Oberländer-Târnoveanu, Andrei Gândilă

To Dr. Virgil Mihăilescu-Bîrliba, for his 70th anniversary

Recently, the National History Museum of Romania was presented a rare stater issued by the Sarmatian king Pharzoïus, found in the area of the town Buzău. It should be mentioned that this is the first specimen so far known to be found on the territory of Romania and is also one of the few specimens of this type known worldwide¹. Unfortunately, the prohibitive price set by the owner was beyond the Museum's financial resources and the coin was not purchased. Nevertheless, it remains an important piece of evidence regarding the circulation of late Hellenistic gold coins from the Black Sea area to the Carpathian Mountains, during the 2nd-1st century BC.

Pharzoïus

Stater

AV 8.24g ↑ 18.5mm

Obv. Bust of Pharzoïus r. diademed and moustached

Artist's monogram under bust²

Rev. Eagle standing r. on tamga,

ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩ[Σ]

Ϝ—C OΛ Ϝ

ΦΑΡ-ZOIO[Σ]

Before embarking on any historical comments regarding the stater found in the area of Buzău, we should reassess the chronology of this type. Although the pioneering studies attempted to date the coins of Pharzoïus during the 2nd-1st c. BC, the currently espoused theory places the issue in the context of the 1st century AD, when the Roman Empire was struggling to impose its rule over the Sarmatian possessions in the area of Olbia and beyond. Thus, the gold staters bearing the name of Pharzoïus were supposedly struck in two chronological sequences. The first corresponds to the good style issues, as the one presented here, while the second is made of a crude style. According to some modern historians and archaeologists, Pharzoïus took control of Olbia in the aftermath of the conflict opposing Mithridates VIII and the people of the Aorsi, Roman allies, at the middle of the 1st century AD. Immediately, Pharzoïus, the new ruler of the Olbian territory, began issuing gold coins in his name. In 57 AD, the well documented campaign conducted by Tiberius Plautius Silvanus Aelianus against the Sarmatians resulted in the defeat of Pharzoïus, who lost his upper hand in the region and the striking of gold coins at Olbia ceased. With the turmoil in Rome during the infamous year 69, Pharzoïus regained momentum in Olbia and resumed the striking of gold coins, this time of poor style. In 83 AD, the Roman Empire regained complete control of Olbia, overthrowing the Sarmatic rule of Inismeus, the alleged son of Pharzoïus³.

Although this cursory review of the broad historical context is correct in its own right, the specific dating of the first series of staters is exceptionable in a number of matters. There is a peculiar and unprecedented difference in style between the two series in less than 15 years. For several reasons we are inclined to believe that the two types belong to two different series. The dies used to strike the "good style" staters show an outstanding artistic level that cannot be matched by any gold issues from the late pseudo-Lysimachus phase (cca. 120-60 BC) struck in the western Black Sea

¹ For a thorough bibliography on the gold coinage of Phrazoïus see V. Cojocaru, *Zwei Pharzoios – Goldstatere aus einer Ukrainischen Privatsammlung*, in *Thraco-Dacica*, 20, 1999, 1-2, p. 385, fn. 6.

² A most rare example of signed dies in the Black Sea area.

³ For the old and more recent bibliography of the topic, see: V. Grosu, *Regatul lui Farzoios și Inismeus*, în *Arheologia Moldovei*, 19, 1996, pp. 247-252.

mints, nor by any other contemporary issues from Olbia (bronze or silver, cca. 2nd-1st c. BC). The monogram ΠΑ is found on several silver and bronze issues from the 2nd c. BC.

Another exceptional feature of the “good style” staters is the presence of the engraver’s signature as a monogram on the obverse, under the king’s neck (perhaps ΑΤ or ΑΙ). The practice of signing the dies is common for the Classical and early Hellenistic periods but it does not occur during the 1st c. AD.

Another important issue is the different standard employed for these two types. The good style coins are struck according to the late Hellenistic Attic light standard of the pseudo-Lysimachus staters and similar to the famous Koson staters, dated to the second half of the 1st century BC, or the issues of king Pharnakes II (63-47 BC) of Bosphorus. One of the latest gold issues in Attic standard in the Black sea area are the staters of Asander, king of Bosphorus (46-17 BC), themselves degrading in style during his reign, but maintaining the same standard, far over 8 grams.

The “clumsy style” staters of Pharzoius are struck matching the Roman standard of the aureus. Likewise, during the reign of Claudius, another ruler of Bosphorus, this time a client king, Cotys I (45-68), issued gold staters according to the Roman standard. At the middle of the 1st century AD, the currently proposed dating for the early Pharzoius staters, the Attic standard had been abandoned in the Pontic region for more than half a century, therefore making its use anachronistic at this time.

The appearance of the “clumsy style” issues is concordant to the historical setting of the Black Sea region in the second half of the 1st c. AD, but the type itself is a mere restitution of the first series, struck a century before. King Pharzoius had been undoubtedly an important figure in the area and the restitution of his staters might have been a political attempt of a new Sarmatic ruler to strengthen his position in the Olbian territory, by claiming direct descendancy from his ancestor.

The monograms slightly differ on two reverse dies of the “good style” coins: a simpler one with letters Π and Α and a second adding the letters Σ (or Μ) and Ρ⁴. On both instances the mint mark ΟΑ is present. It has been suggested that the monogram relates to the magistrate: ΟΑ[ΒΙΟΠΟΛΙΤΕΩΝ] Π[ΡΩΤΟΣ] Α[ΡΧΩΝ] followed by the initial of the magistrate. V. Cojocaru presents two specimens of “clumsy style”, a first with monogrammed ΠΑ followed by ΑΣ or ΑΜ and a second followed by ΜΟΑ, as a sequence of letters. Both bear also the mint name ΟΑ: Although the author points out to magistrates after 69AD, we suppose that it is in fact a restitution of the earlier type, with the same combination of letters taken from the good style staters. Even more, the second specimen presented by Cojocaru bears the ΟΑ twice. We should also mention that the early specimen presented by Pick has only ΟΑ and the monogram ΠΑ, although the rule of mentioning the magistrate, if applicable, would have been compulsory.

Although Dr. George Severeanu⁵ had a similar coin in his personal collection, unfortunately, there is no data about its finding place. It was most likely purchased from a refugee from Russia, after the Bolshevik Revolution and the following Civil War. Therefore the stater from Buzău is likely to be the easternmost find of this type. The coin could have arrived at Buzău in a number of circumstances related to its presumable dating during the 1st century BC. Most probably, it could be related to the campaigns of the Dacian king Burebista, who was trying to gain control of the rich west-Pontic coast. Consequently, it could be a part of a mercenary’s payment or a result of looting in the Pontic territories.

In conclusion the style and weight of the “good style” staters of Pharzoius makes its dating to the 1st c. AD anachronistic. Such a fine artistic style of the dies as well as the presence of the engraver’s monogram cannot be found in the Black Sea area later than the mid 2nd c. BC or ever earlier. At the same time the light Attic standard gold coinage in the area was no longer employed from the last decades of the 1st c. BC. The “clumsy style” staters of Pharzoius, having the weight standard of the aureus, are quite similar in style and technique with the pseudo-autonomous issues of Olbia struck during the Flavian period. Therefore we should conclude that the two gold issues bearing the name of Pharzoius belong to different historical periods.

⁴ The coin here with same dies as Leu 26, 1988, lot 189, currently in the William Stancomb’s collection of the Black Sea region see SNG XI, 930 and pl. XLIII and also G. Severeanu, *Le statère d’or de Pharsoios. Vue générale sur la souveraineté gétique sous le rapport de la numismatique de la cité d’Olbia*, in BSNR, 19, 1924, 49-50, p. 7, fig. I, while a second reverse is presented in B. Pick, *Die Antiken Münzen Nord-Griechenlands*, vol. I, Berlin, 1899, pl. XII, 6.

⁵ G. Severeanu, *op. cit.*, fig. 1.



fig. 1. - Stater, Pharzoios, **fig. 2.** - Olbia, didrachm, 2nd-1st c. BC. (LHS Numismatik AG, Auction 95, lot no. 547), **fig. 3.** - Olbia, chalkous, cca. 100 BC (Fritz Rudolf Künker Münzenhandlung, Auction 94, lot no. 517), **fig. 4.** - Olbia, chalkous, cca. 120-70 BC (Münzen & Medaillen Deutschland GmbH, Auction 15, lot no. 10), **fig. 5a.** - Olbia, chalkous, cca. 1st c. BC (Münzen & Medaillen Deutschland GmbH, Auction 15, lot no. 9.), **fig. 5b.** - Olbia, chalkous, cca. 69-96. AD (Münzen & Medaillen Deutschland GmbH, Auction 15, lot no. 12), **fig. 6.** - detail, **fig. 7.** - (Pharnakes, stater, 63-47 BC) (Baldwin's Auctions Ltd., Dmitry Markov Coins & Medals, M&M Numismatics Ltd., The New York Sale XI, auction 11th January, 2006, lot no 138, 8,24 g).



Fig. 8. - Asander, as archon, stater 47-3 BC (Classical Numismatic Group, Mail Bid Sale 72, lot no 692, 8.23 g), **fig. 9** - Fig. 9 Asander, as king, stater 19-18 BC (Classical Numismatic Group, Mail Bid Sale 67, lot no 620, 8.10 g), **fig. 10** - Bosphorus, Cotys I, "stater", 52 AD (Leu Numismatik AG, Sale 83, lot no 720, 7.89 g), **fig. 11** - Pharzoius "good style" (n. 6); Pharzoius "clumsy style" (n. 7-8); Inismeus, silver "drachm" (n. 9) (B. Pick, op.cit., plate XII).