

The rise and fall of the Roman fort in Apsaros: recent numismatic evidence



Abstract: Archaeological discoveries made since 2014 at the site of the Roman fort in Apsaros/Gonio (Georgia) have shed more light on the earliest as well as later stages of the presence of the Roman army on the Colchis coast and on the history of the Apsaros fort itself. The paper reports on the new findings concerning the chronology of the Roman fort, and an essential part of the conclusions draws upon the results of numismatic research on recent coin finds from the site. Six years of fieldwork by a Polish-Georgian team have uncovered the remains of a possible *horreum*, built in the last decade of Nero's reign, underlying a *balneum* constructed probably during Trajan's Parthian war and rebuilt under Hadrian into a *praetorium*; a fine mosaic floor decorated with geometric motifs was found in one of the rooms of this early 2nd-century structure.

Keywords: Georgia, Colchis, Apsaros, Gonio, numismatics, coins

I. THE RISE

“Apsaros seemed to me to be the limit of the length of the Pontus”, so Arrian (Arr. *Peripl.* 11.iv), governor of Cappadocia, commented on the localization of this Roman fort in his description of a journey along the Colchis coast in the early 130s (Stadter 1980; Belfiore 2009) [Fig. 1]. The fort, which was manned by five auxiliary cohorts at the time, was at the peak of its development,

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having been established some 50 years earlier. The units stationed there were part of the *exercitus Cappadocicus* that for two centuries had guarded Roman interests on the northeastern fringes of the Empire (Lekvinadze 1969; Dąbrowa 1980; Mitford 1980; Kolendo 1982; Dąbrowa 1989; Braund 1994: 171–204; Bennett 2006; Speidel 2009; Vitale 2013). The founding of a fort at the location of an old Colchis settlement, south of the Apsaros (modern Chorokhi) river, was a sound idea from a strategic point of view (M.P. Speidel 1986: 657–658). It ensured control of the trails running north along the Black Sea, as well as of the inland tracks heading for Iberia. The location ensured an excellent base for Roman military action in the eastern Black Sea region as well as Armenia.

Regular archaeological research in the fort of Apsaros started in the early 1990s with the exploration of the area inside the monumental fortifications of the Byz-

antine, Georgian and Ottoman fortress (Kakhidze and Mamuladze 2016: 162–169), largely corresponding to the extent of the Roman fort which is not visually discernible on the ground today [Fig. 3; see Fig. 1]. The excavation was spearheaded by Georgian archaeologists, who invited first an expedition from the University of Jena to cooperate for three seasons starting in 2000 (Geyer 2003: 5) and later a team from the University of Warsaw, which has been working with the Georgian partner since 2013 (Karasiewicz-Szczypiorski 2016; Karasiewicz-Szczypiorski et al. 2016; Karasiewicz-Szczypiorski and Mamuladze 2019). Archaeological investigations and geophysical prospection have led to the identification of a number of structures from Roman and Byzantine times, tracing in part the extent of the Roman fort and establishing the main phases of occupation. The research has also yielded information on the dating of



Fig. 1. Aerial view of the fortress at Apsaros/Gonio from the south, the Black Sea shore and the city of Batumi in the background (Courtesy Gonio-Apsaros Archaeological-Architectural Museum Reserve)

the fort (Kakhidze and Mamuladze 2016: 159–169; see Geyer 2003 and Plontke-Lünig 2003). A key question is still the full identification of Roman units stationed in Apsaros (Khalvashi, Aslanishvili, and Kakhidze 2018).

One approach to the history of the fort has been proposed in the report of the German expedition (Geyer 2003), coupled with a series of Georgian publications (Kakhidze et al. 2002; Kakhidze 2008; Mamuladze and Kamadadze 2019). It supplements a reading of written sources with an examination of the archaeological record, dating the arrival of the Roman garrison to Apsaros broadly to the third quarter of the 1st century AD, probably before AD 77, which is when Pliny first noted the presence of a fort in Apsaros (Plin. *HN* 6, 12). Development peaked in the reign of Hadrian, while the decline and ultimate abandonment, still undated, seems to have been triggered by the Boranoi raiding of the Colchis in the AD 250s. Researchers generally agreed that even ruined, the fort could have still functioned for a time until just after the

mid-4th century AD and was not rebuilt before the second half of the 6th century (Kakhidze 2008: 304–314; Kakhidze and Mamuladze 2016: 159–169).

The results of recent research by the Georgian–Polish archaeological expedition, emphasizing the data from a study of about 250 coins found through the 2019 season, now held in the Gonio-Apsaros Archaeological-Architectural Museum Reserve and Batumi Archaeological Museum, have led to a revision of the accepted dating. In short, a few clear peaks in the number of coins reaching the site are directly related to the ups and downs of the long-lasting armed conflict between the Roman Empire and the Parthian state [Fig. 2], reflecting its scale and dynamics in a regional perspective restricted to the Pontic frontier, but also to some extent in a supraregional one. An analysis of coin finds from Apsaros shows that apart from a few periods of intensive occupation by units of the Roman army, especially in the “golden age” of the fort in the reigns of Trajan and Hadrian, the garrison must have been extremely small.

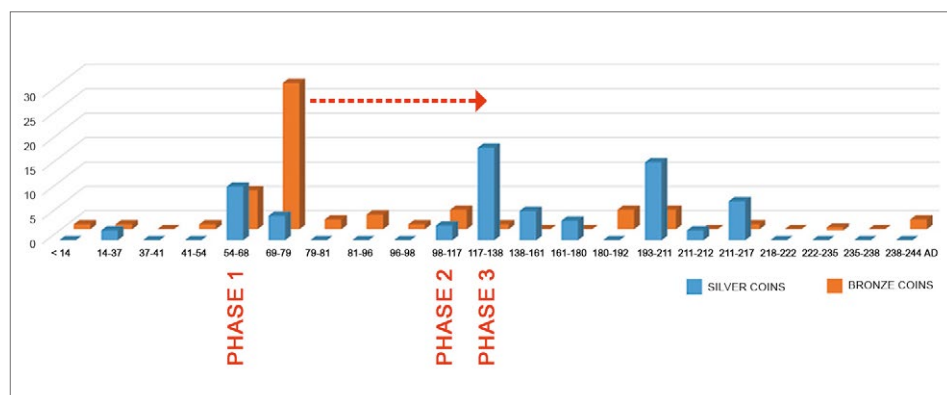


Fig. 2. Chronological structure of the identified silver and bronze coins found in Apsaros by issue date; arrow marks the influx of worn and partly countermarked bronze coins of Antioch and Judaea during Trajan's Parthian war (Processing P. Jaworski)

Moreover, coin circulation would have been restricted to a local market characterized by a low level of monetization (Jaworski forthcoming).

The architecture uncovered in the central part of the Roman fort (chosen for excavation by the Georgian–Polish team based on a reconstructed course of the defenses, grounded in a plan published by Angelika Geyer [2003] and verified in the field by the team [Fig. 3 inset]) has been dated to the second half of the 1st and first half of the 2nd century AD. Three distinct building phases have been identified [Table 1]: a Neronian phase corresponding to a *horreum*, which was rebuilt into a *balneum* complex under Trajan and restructured in Hadrian's reign into a *praetorium*. The lattermost

development is attested by a foundation deposit [No. 4; see Table 1], containing three cistophoric tetradrachms struck in the Ephesus and Laodicea mints under Hadrian, about AD 128–130 (Metcalf 1980; *RPC* III.1: 159–160, 165–180) [see below, Fig. 6]. At a distant location like Apsaros, the *cistophori*, which had a circulation restricted to the province of Asia, must be considered as quite exceptional (Jaworski forthcoming).

The structure uncovered below the remains of the commander's house and bathhouse was part of the earliest building phase connected with the Neronian fort (Karasiewicz-Szczypiorski and Mamuladze 2019). A set of stairs, no longer used when the bath was operating, and a deep foundation were uncovered on



Fig. 3. Plan of the Hadrianic *praetorium* with mosaic floor (Phase 3); inset, location of the Georgian–Polish excavations in the central part of the Roman fort in Apsaros (University of Warsaw | drawing M. Marciniak, processing O. Kubrak)

Table 1. Chronology of the Roman fort in Apsaros (P. Jaworski)

Years AD	Reign	Historical context	Building phases	Apsaros in ancient sources	Coin deposits
58–68	Nero	Corbulo's campaign against Parthia Roman annexation of Pontus Nero's plans of expedition to the 'Caucasian Gates'	Phase 1: <i>horreum</i>	–	Foundation deposit 1 Foundation deposit 2
69–79	Vespasian	Anicetus' revolt in Colchis legio XII <i>Fulminata</i> in Melitene legio XII expedition to Albania	–	Plin. <i>HN</i> , 6.12 (ca. AD 77)	–
79–114	Titus–Trajan	Period of stability	–	–	–
114–117	Trajan	Parthian war	Phase 2: <i>balneum</i>	–	Foundation deposit 3
117–129	Hadrian	Period of stability	–	–	–
129–135	Hadrian	Tension between Rome and Iberia Arrian's inspection of Colchis (five cohorts in Apsaros) Arrian's campaign against the Alans	Phase 3: <i>praetorium</i>	Arr. <i>Peripl.</i> 6.1–2 <i>CIL</i> X, 1202	Foundation deposit 4
138–161	Antoninus Pius	Period of stability	–	–	–
162–166	M. Aurelius / L. Verus	Parthian war	–	–	–
166–192	M. Aurelius / Commodus	Period of stability	–	–	–
193–199	Septimius Severus	Parthian wars	–	–	–
200–215	S. Severus / Caracalla	Period of stability	–	–	–
216–217	Caracalla	Campaign against Parthia	Phase 4(?)	–	–
217–230	Macrinus–Severus Alexander	Period of stability	–	–	–
230–257	Severus Alexander–Valerian I	Sassanian wars Fall of Dura Europos	–	–	–
255–257	Valerian I	Sea invasions of the Boranoi – fall of Pityus and Trapezus Fort in Apsaros burnt and abandoned	–	–	Hoard 1 Hoard 2

the southern side, outside of a room with a geometric floor mosaic [see Fig. 3]. Part of this foundation was formed of the walls of an earlier building, characterized by distinctive ashlar masonry, preserved in a few courses. The older building had been leveled and filled in with soil in preparation for the new structure. A small hole reaching into the inner chambers of the building was recorded between the buttresses in the northern part of the wall; at some point it was sealed with an irregular stone.

This earlier building, interpreted as a *horreum*, was dated by two hemidrachms of Nero minted in Cappadocian Caesarea, discovered in conjunction and embedded in the structure of one of the buttresses (Foundation deposit 1; found in 2015) [see Tables 1, 2] (Karasiewicz-Szczypiorski and Mamuladze 2019: 66, 68, Fig. 3). Another foundation deposit (No. 2, found in

2019), dated to Phase 1 from Neronian times [see Tables 1, 2], contained coins commemorating Corbulo's victory over the Parthians in the war for Armenia [Fig. 4]. The coins were issued in AD 59 (Sydenham and Malloy 1978: 40, Note 80). From an ideological point of view, the image of Victory on the reverse of the two coins emphasizes the intentional nature of the deposition of these coins in the wall of a building under construction. If so, then it is rather doubtful that such an act, making use of Nero's portrait, could have taken place after his death, considering that he was condemned to *damnatio memoriae* and that many coins with his image were either withdrawn from circulation or destroyed. Therefore, the date of the foundation of the fort in Apsaros in the 60s is more than likely, perhaps closer to AD 63, which is when Rome finally incorporated all of Pontus.

Table 2. Foundation deposits dated to the reign of Nero from the Apsaros fort (Processing P. Jaworski)

Find	Issuer	Mint	Denomination	Findspot	Building phase	Period of deposition
Foundation deposit 1	Nero Nero	Caesarea, Cappadocia Caesarea, Cappadocia	Hemidrachm Hemidrachm	<i>Horreum</i>	Phase 1	Neronian
Foundation deposit 2	Tiberius Gaius Nero Polemo II	Caesarea, Cappadocia Caesarea, Cappadocia Caesarea, Cappadocia Pontus	Drachm Drachm Hemidrachm Drachm	<i>Extra muros?</i>	Phase 1	Neronian



Fig. 4. Hemidrachms of Nero found in the *horreum* at Apsaros fort (Foundation deposit 1): 1 – Cappadocia, Caesarea mint (RPC I, 3644), 2 – Cappadocia, Caesarea mint (RPC I, 3646) (University of Warsaw | photos P. Jaworski)

It is noteworthy that the loose silver coins of Nero found at Apsaros are all identified as coinage struck in Caesarea in Cappadocia, which was the main source of silver coinage in the region

(Golenko 1964: 23–30; T. Dundua 2017; see Walker 1976; 1977; 1978: *passim*; Metcalf 1996; Butcher and Ponting 1997). However, virtually all of the bronze coins of this emperor and other rulers of the



Fig. 5. Bronze coins struck in the 1st century AD in Syria and Judaea, found in Apsaros: 1 – Judaea, Agrippa II (*RPC* I, 4989); 2 – Nero, Antioch(?) (countermarks: *GIC* 281, 735); 3 – Otho, Antioch (*RPC* I, 4320; countermarks: *GIC* 352, 355) (University of Warsaw | photos P. Jaworski; Fig. 5.3 courtesy of the Archaeological Museum in Batumi).



Fig. 6. *Cistophori* of Hadrian found in the *praetorium* at the Apsaros fort (Foundation deposit 4): 1, 2 – Asia, Laodicea mint (*RPC* III, 1399), 3 – Asia, Ephesus mint (*RPC* III, 1332) (University of Warsaw | photos P. Jaworski)

1st century AD (till Nerva's reign) that have been found in Apsaros represent middle denominations and were struck at the mints operating in Antioch-on-the-Orontes (mostly of the so-called 'SC' series) and Judaea [Fig. 5]. Some of these coins bore countermarks, associated among others with the legions X *Fretensis* and, possibly, XII *Fulminata*. The remaining countermarks, while not specifically related to this legion, were all of Judaic or Syrian provenience. They may be interpreted as coinage traveling with detachments of the said legion along the Roman frontier during the Parthian campaign

of Trajan in AD 114–117 (Howgego 1983; 1985: 19–20; Butcher 2004: 187–188; Pollard 2004: 126–127) [see Fig. 2]. Under the rule of Hadrian and his successors, the stream of bronze coins to Apsaros was reduced to a mere trickle and concerned coinage primarily from a mint operating in Trapezus (Jaworski forthcoming; see Wojan 2006; 2016) [Fig. 7]. The poor monetarization of the local economy around Apsaros at the dawn of Roman presence would have necessitated presumably the circulation of considerable quantities of foreign bronze issues to meet the army's needs.

II. THE FALL

A fundamental source for the seaborne invasion of the Boranoi on the Colchis coast in the AD 250s is the *Historia Nova* by Zosimos (Zos. *Hist. Nova* I. xxxi, 1–xxxiv, 2). Although this Constantinopolitan historian, writing at the turn of the 5th and 6th centuries, does not directly mention

the barbarian attack on the Roman fort at Apsaros, it can be assumed based on his words that the fleet used by the Boranoi to sail toward Trapezus may have taken a course along the eastern coast of Colchis, which would have brought them near this fort [Fig. 8].

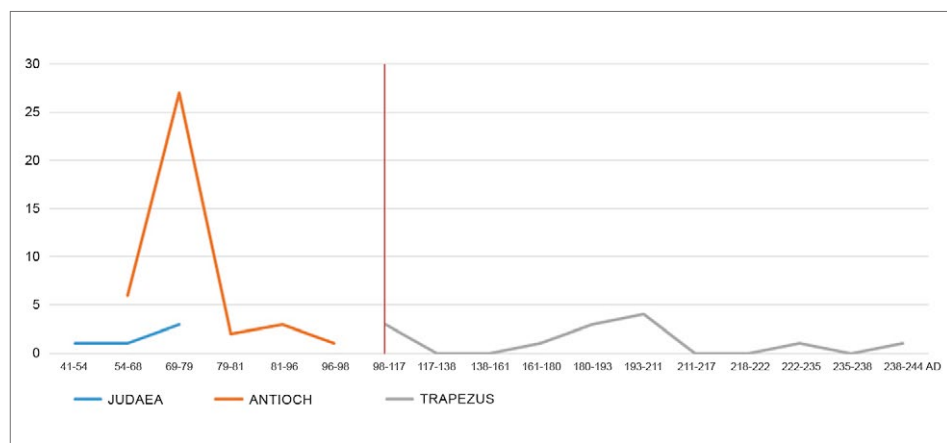


Fig. 7. Chronological structure of bronze coins found in Apsaros, struck in Judaea, Syrian Antioch and Trapezus, presented by the date of issue (red vertical line indicates the break between Trajanic and post-Trajanic influx of coins (Processing P. Jaworski)

The incursions of the Boranoi in the AD 250s (Salamon 1971; Scardigli 1976; Olshausen 1991; Hajredinova 1994; Lavrov 1995; Bolgov 2004; Aibabin 2016; Myzgin and Didenko forthcoming) began a series of devastating invasions along the Black Sea shores of the territory of the Roman Empire, Asia Minor and the Balkans in particular. These invasions had an even more destructive effect occurring as they did in the midst of the Imperial Crisis destroying the Roman state from within. Taking advantage of the breakdown of political power in the Pantikapaion, the Boranoi launched their campaigns from the capital of the Bosporan Kingdom and used the Bosporan fleet stationed there for their conquests. According to Zosimos (Zos. *Hist. Nova* I. xxxii, 1), “The Boranoi destroyed everything they encountered. The people of Pontus withdrew inland, into the well-fortified places” (an apparent reflection of these dramatic events

is constituted by two monetary hoards found in Eki and Sepieti; see below).

The first attack, around AD 255 or 256, was launched on Pityus (see Apakidze 1975–1977). The commander of the Roman forces Sucessianus defended the place so capably that the Boranoi retreated to their ships in fear of reinforcements coming from other Roman posts (Zos. *Hist. Nova* I. xxxii, 1). But they soon relaunched their attack, sailing from Pantikapaion to Phasis, near to where they tried unsuccessfully to plunder the temple of Artemis. When that failed, they struck Pityus again. This time the fortress fell, Sucessianus having been summoned to Antioch by Emperor Valerian. Encouraged by their success, the Boranoi turned their ships again south, reaching Trapezus, which—despite a reinforced military defence—was easily captured and plundered. “They devastated the rest of the territory as



Fig. 8. Roman garrisons in Colchis attacked from the sea by the Boranoi, based on Zosimos' account in *Historia Nova* (Editing P. Jaworski)

well”, writes Zosimos (Zos. *Hist. Nova* I. xxxiii, 3), carrying so much loot to their homes that they decided not to launch further attacks on the completely devastated Colchis, but chose the sea route along the western shores of the Black Sea (Zos. *Hist. Nova* I. xxxiii, 1–2).

The Boranoi raid has been considered by the archaeologists excavating Apsaros as one of the possible reasons for the abandonment of the fort by the Roman army and its destruction dated to around the mid-3rd century (see E. Kakhidze 2008: 305). Recent numismatic evidence from the fort in Apsaros, both individual coins found in layers of burning attesting to a conflagration and hoards found in the vicinity, appear to confirm this hypothesis.

The raids of the Boranoi on Colchis are regularly cited as the cause of serious damages to the substance of the fort in Apsaros. Most of the excavated trenches within the late layers yielded evidence of destruction dated to the 3rd century AD, overlaid directly by layers of Byzantine and Ottoman date. The Byzantine fort that was built on top of the remains of the fort from the times of the Principate corresponded to the earlier phase only with regard to the course of the eastern fortifications. The general orientation of the fort was modified from a north–south to an east–west alignment. The layout of this second fort is more Byzantine than late Roman in character, but it is very difficult to observe any Byzantine remains in the walls from this period (E. Kakhidze 2008: 305; A. Kakhidze and Mamuladze 2016: 161; see Lekvinadze 1961), not to speak of earlier phases. The fort was rebuilt and used again from

about the mid-6th century, most likely because of the destruction of Justinian Petra (Tsikhisdziri) located some 40 km to the north. There are only a few bronze coins of Justin I and Justinian I among the monetary finds from the fort.

The destruction and abandonment of the fort by the Roman army does not necessarily mean the end of civil settlement in Apsaros and its vicinity. The region has a long history of occupation in times before the Romans as well. Excavation at the Makho necropolis (A. Kakhidze and Shalikadze 2010) near Apsaros has revealed a number of richly furnished graves which yielded monetary issues struck by Aurelian and Diocletian in the end of the 3rd century. According to Emzar Kakhidze, the written and archaeological evidence of continued residence of Roman army units in the fort at this time is insufficient, although his reasoning leads him to move the date of the ultimate abandonment of the structure down to the second half of the 4th century (E. Kakhidze 2008: 305, 313–314). The archaeological finds from the fort excavation are exclusively of 1st through 3rd century AD date and there are no finds typical of the second half of the 4th and the 5th century AD, as noted by Emzar Kakhidze, such as glass with blue blobs in the decoration and Sinopian conical amphorae, not to mention coins from this period.

The late Roman coins in the archaeological record from Apsaros deserve comment. Not only are there no coins from the second half of the 4th and the 5th centuries AD, but there are also no coins from the first half of the 4th and second half of the 3rd centuries AD. The sole exception are two antoniniani of

Aurelian found within the late fort at Apsaros (Varshalomidze 2009: 26–28, Nos 61, 62); however, these two should be ascribed rather to the civil settlement judging by local parallels. It is common knowledge that the share of antoniniani from the second half of the 3rd century AD, and particularly bronze coins from the 4th century AD, is notably high in the monetary mass originating from sites

associated with Roman military presence. One can hardly imagine that relevant archaeological contexts from the Apsaros fort would not have yielded large quantities of this sort of finds, if the fort in Apsaros had actually been garrisoned by a Roman unit in the second half of the 3rd or the first half of the 4th century AD. The truth of the matter is that the youngest group of coin finds from the fort dates

Table 3. Monetary hoards found in Apsaros and Pityus, possibly related to the Boranoi seaborne incursions in Colchis: P – Kingdom of Pontus, R – Roman coinage, C – Caesarea in Cappadocia, T – Trapezus (Processing P. Jaworski)

Years AD	Reign	Apsaros hoard 1 (1998) <i>tpq</i> = AD 217			Apsaros hoard 2 (2018) <i>tpq</i> = AD 235		Pityus hoard 1 (1958) <i>tpq</i> = AD 249	
		silver			silver	bronze	silver	bronze
		P	R	C	C	T	C	T
14–37	Tiberius	–	1	–	–	–	–	–
37–41	Gaius	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
41–54	Claudius	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
54–68	Nero	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
	Polemo II	4	–	–	–	–	–	–
69–79	Vespasian	–	1	–	–	–	–	–
79–81	Titus	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
81–96	Domitian	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
96–98	Nerva	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
98–117	Trajan	–	3	–	–	1	–	–
117–138	Hadrian	–	2	3	5	–	4	–
138–161	Antoninus Pius	–	2	–	1	–	–	–
161–180	Lucius Verus Marcus Aurelius	–	1	–	–	1	1	–
180–192	Commodus	–	1	–	–	1	–	7
193–211	Clodius Albinus Septimius Severus Geta	–	2	14	1	2	4	60
211–217	Caracalla	–	2	5	1	–	1	32
217–235	Macrinus Elagabalus Severus Alexander	–	–	–	–	1	–	
238–244	Gordian III	–	–	–	–	–	–	16
244–249	Philip I	–	–	–	–	–	–	3
ante 250	Undetermined	–	–	–	–	–	–	21
Total		4	15	23	8	6	10	139

from the reigns of Severus Alexander to Gordian III. Some of them—silver coins minted at Caesarea and bronzes issued by Trapezus—were found in layers consisting of ash and show traces of being in a fire [Fig. 9].

At this point, one should also mention two coin hoards from Apsaros, discovered in 1998 by the Georgian team (Varshalomidze 2009: 28–47, 87–88, Nos 63–103) and in 2018 (sector SO-XIII of the site). The hoards were found *extra muros*, in the area of a *vicus* located outside the south defense wall of the Roman fort. The first hoard [Table 3: Hoard 1] contained 42 silver coins, from Tiberius to Caracalla, evidently chosen for the highest silver content. The 1st century AD was represented by the Pontic drachms of Polemo II, the 2nd century primarily by Roman denarii and the Severan period by drachms minted in Caesarea. This kind of thesaurization of silver coin sets is nothing unusual among the hoards deposited around the mid-3rd century AD, when the traditional Roman monetary system suffered a total breakdown. The same can be said, among others, of a hoard of silver and bronze Roman coins

from Ptolemais in Cyrenaica, dated to the early AD 250s; the silver coins in the set were 30 years and older, reflecting a reaction to a continuous depreciation of the money, while the bronze coinage was a fair representation of the monetary mass still in circulation at the time (Jaworski 2009: 152–154). The other hoard [Table 3: Hoard 2] was composed of eight silver coins struck in Caesarea, dated from Hadrian to Caracalla, and six massive bronzes from the Trapezus mint and dated from Marcus Aurelius to Alexander Severus. These coins were all burnt, presumably in a conflagration.

The structure of the last hoard from Apsaros bears a striking resemblance to the much larger hoard discovered in 1958 in Pityus (Golenko 1964: 33–34, 64, No. 15, and 75, No. 45; Šamba 1987: 71; see T. Dundua 2017: 93). The chronological range of this deposit in the case of bronze coins minted in Trapezus reaches to Philip II, that is, even further beyond the dating of the youngest silver coin in the hoard than was the case of the Apsaros hoard. One is justified to link both the Pityus hoard and the two Apsaros hoards with the second invasion of the

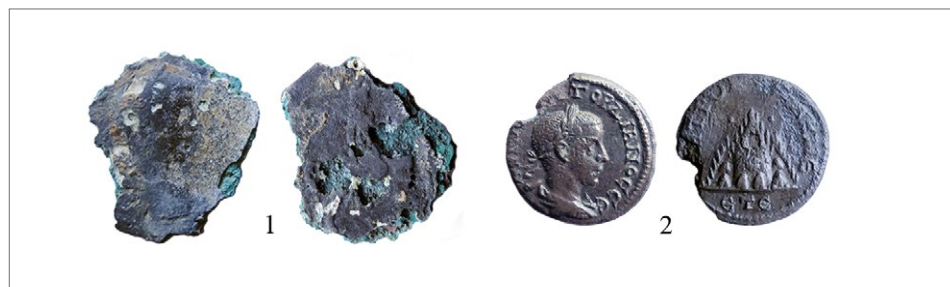


Fig. 9. Coins found in the Apsaros fort in layers of burning from the mid-3rd century AD: 1 – Pontus, Trapezus mint, AE coin of Severus Alexander (ante AD 235; uncertain type); 2 – Cappadocia, Caesarea mint, didrachm of Gordian III (AD 241/2; Ganschow 2018/II: 897d) (University of Warsaw | photos P. Jaworski)

Boranoi described in Zosimos's account. Moreover, the Georgian numismatist Giorgi Dundua published two very similar hoards consisting of silver coins mainly of Rome and Caesarea in Capadocia, discovered in Eki in 1971 (907 specimens, see G.F. Dundua 1977: 66; see T. Dundua 2017: 94) and Sepieti in

1931 (approximately 400 specimens, see Golenko 1964: 69–70, No. 27; see T. Dundua 2017: 94–95) near Archaeopolis, in the Colchian hinterland. The dating of both hoards to AD 222 also makes an association with the Boranoi incursions against Colchis a distinct possibility (Braund 1994: 262).

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