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Note on the Stizhok hoard (Ukraine)

Coins with Asprokastron countermarks and Wallachian ducats

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and Lilia DERGACIOVA**

In the summer of 2011, the first author of this article obtained twenty four silver coins at an European auction. Most of these silver coins were with 15th century countermarks¹. During the following cataloguing of the newly arrived collection, it became clear that the coins came from one place, almost certainly a hoard. A dialogue with the dealers at the auction house led to a treasure hunter, who had discovered a clay pot in Western Ukraine in spring 2011, using a metal detector. This severely cracked pot contained the coins that later were purchased at the auction.

The pot was found in a field near the Western Ukrainian village Stizhok (Стіжок), which is located in Shumsk district of Ternopil' region². Together with the coins, the pot contained a gold-plated silver cover of an icon that was cut into small pieces, a handful of small pearls and bits of birch bark, which was the packing material to protect the contents. The complete hoard contained up to 2500 silver coins from the Late Middle Ages.

Half of the Stizhok hoard – around 1245 pieces – was examined prior to the auctions in the summer of 2011. The hoard was dominated by approximately 800 denarius and 30 half-groats struck in the reign of Grand Duke of Lithuania and King of Poland Alexander Jagiellon. In addition, the hoard had around 30 Prague groats, around 50 Wallachian ducats from the reign of Vladislav II and four Moldavian groats from the reign of Stephen III. The hoard also included nearly 20 Golden Horde silver coins (aspers) countermarked by a Greek cross between four roundles in Asprokastron (Cetatea Albă). One of these coins was countermarked twice, by a Greek cross between four roundles and by a Lithuanian 'Gediminas Column' accompanied by four roundles³. Totally, the examined part of the hoard contained around 25 coins bearing such a 'Gediminas Column' accompanied by four roundles: Golden Horde aspers, Genoese-Tartar aspers from Caffa and a Crimean Khanate asper.

Finally, the pot contained approximately 60 Genoese-Tartar aspers bearing the names of khans in the Crimean Khanate, 30 Genoese-Tartar aspers with names of khans in the Golden Horde, and up to 30 coins from different mints in the late-period of the Golden Horde. Another five Golden Horde coins were left unidentified. The hoard included around 160 aspers issued in the Crimean Khanate by Hacı I

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¹ These 24 coins are now in the numismatic collection of

Alexander Petrov.

² Stizhok has following coordinates in geographic coordinate system: 50-10'47"N 25-51'57"E

³ On 'Gediminas Column' countermarks – V.V. Zaitsev, *O nakhodke trekh kladov dzhuchidskikh monet s litovskimi nadpiskami*, in *Srednevekovaja numizmatika Vostochnoj Evropy*, ed. V.V. Zaitsev, 3, Moscow, 2009, p. 190-201.

Giray, Nur Devlet, Mengli I Giray and an asper struck in the Ottoman Empire in the reign of sultan Mehmed II.

Around half of the hoard coins remained unexamined, and these were offered for auction during the summer of 2011, simultaneously with the coins from the inspected part. The unexamined coins were similar to the examined specimens. Only a small number of dissimilar coins were traced back to the hoard, such as for instance a denarius of Matthias Corvinus, King of Hungary.

The twenty four coins that were obtained in summer 2011 make up one percent sample of the total hoard. This sample includes fourteen coins from the Golden Horde, six Tartar-Genoese coins, two coins from the Kingdom of Poland, one coin from the Crimean Khanate, and one coin from the Principality of Wallachia. Six of the hoard coins are included in the present note: five Golden Horde coins countermarked in the Moldavian town of Asprokastron (Cetatea Albă)⁴ and one silver ducat struck in the Principality of Wallachia during the reign of Vladislav II. The host coins from the Stizhok hoard were struck in the reign of the Golden Horde khans Beg Sufi (no. 1), Kükük Muhammad (or Muhammad bin Timur) (no. 5) and Sayyid Ahmad (nos. 2-4)⁵. The countermark title 'Asprokastron' came from early studies in medieval copper coins with a circular inscription АСІПКАСТРОУ (ΑΣΠΙΠΟΚΑΣΤΡΟΥ) and a depiction of a Greek cross between four roundles. This design was characteristic along the coast of the Black Sea in the Late Middle Ages, ever since a mint was set up in the medieval town known as Asprokastron, Maurocastro, Cetatea Albă, Akkerman, and eventually Bilhorod-Dnistrovskyi. The fortified settlement had the Moldavian name Cetatea Albă throughout the 15th century, as the fortress belonged to the medieval Principality of Moldavia from the end of the 14th century⁶. The town remained a Moldavian strategic military outpost and trade centre until 1484.

The local money trade in Cetatea Albă was dependent on imported silver host coins. In such circumstances, the Golden Horde coins countermarked with a Greek cross between four roundles had a noticeable weight fluctuation, ranging from 0.61 to 0.70 g. In comparison with the coins of Beg Sufi and Sayyid Ahmad, the twice-countermarked Kükük Muhammad asper is the lightest in the Norwegian collection, consisting of 0.61 g⁷.

The period when Cetatea Albă issued its distinctive copper and countermarked silver coins have been subject to a series of discussions that lasted almost a century. In the course of these long-lasting debates scholars came up with theories that associated this coinage with the reign of different Moldavian Princes. Among them was Alexander I⁸ (1400-1432), Peter III Aaron⁹ (1451-1457), and Stephen III¹⁰ at

⁴ The modern-day Ukrainian town of Bilhorod-Dnistrovskyi, which is situated on the Dniester right bank close to the Black Sea in the Odessa region.

⁵ One of these coins can be attributed only with reservations.

⁶ The exact date of the fortress' incorporation into the medieval Principality of Moldavia remains unknown. The very first written record mentioned that the town was Moldavian from the late 14th century, dated to 30 March 1392. The record includes a description of the Moldavian Gospodar (Prince) Roman I (around 1391-1394), with a statement that the Moldavian territory stretched 'from the mountains to the sea' (M. Costăchescu, *Documentele moldovenesti înainte de Ștefan cel Mare. Documente interne. Urice (Ispisoace). Surete, Regeste, Traduceri 1374-1473*, I, Iași, 1932, nr. 3). The fortified

town remained Moldavian until summer 1484 when the army of the Ottoman sultan Bayezid II (1481-1512) conquered the fortress.

⁷ A forthcoming article in the periodical *Stratum plus*, nr. 6, 2012 is devoted to the hoard silver coins countermarked by a column accompanied by four roundles.

⁸ A.S. Belekav, *Mednye monety belgorodskoj čekani serediny XV v.*, in *Numizmatičeskie issledovanija po istorii Jugo-Vostočnoj Evropy*, Chişinău, 1990, p. 180-185.

⁹ P. Nicorescu, *Monete moldovenesti bătute la Cetatea Albă*, Iași, 1937, p. 4-10; O. Ilescu, M. Dinu, *Tezaurul monetar din secolul al XV-lea de la Cârpiți, SCȘIași*, 8, 1957, 2, p. 345.

¹⁰ E. Oberländer-Târnoaveanu, *Emisiunile monetare bătute pe teritoriul Moldovei în vremea lui Ștefan cel Mare (1457-1504) – Analiză critică*, CN, 9-11 (2003-2005), 2005, p. 299-388.

the beginning of his long reign (1457-1504). Some scholars could not exclude the possibility that the coinage continued during the whole Moldavian period of the medieval town history¹¹.

A core issue in the scholarly discussions has been the phenomenon of imported silver host coins whose inscriptions were largely obliterated by countermarks. Hardly legible remains of inscriptions together with metal composition analysis became the clues to discover the host coins' country of origin. The numerous numismatic artefacts that have been found during the past decade have contributed substantially to the amount of data on countermarked coins, thus giving scholars an opportunity to solve the century-long mystery of identifying the time-span when such coinage existed. Based on analysis of oriental silver aspers countermarked in Cetatea Albă, E. Nicolae has concluded that the mint may have started Asprokastro-type countermarking at the end of Alexander I rule. The practice continued when Alexander's successors came to power. Furthermore, the Greek inscription ΑΧΙΡΟΚΑΚΤΟΥ on the coins points out the coinage in Cetatea Albă was possible at the end of the 14th and beginning of the 15th centuries but not later than 1440s, i.e. not after the Moldavian Prince Ștefan II rule¹². The five countermarked Golden Horde silver coins from the Stizhok hoard correspond remarkably well to the countermarking period proposed by E. Nicolae.

Special attention must be given to the hoard silver host coin struck during Küçük Muhammad's reign (no. 5). Along with an Asprokastro-style countermark this asper bears one more countermark. The traces of two countermarks on the host coin are slightly overlapping each other, thus making it difficult to find out which die was used first to countermark the asper. One of the dies constitutes a combination of a column with four roundels. The die design is based upon a Lithuanian 'Gediminas Column' whose central pier is often moved to the left or to the right side to make room for roundels (fig. 2a-c). This pattern was presumably used during the reign of the Lithuanian-born Prince Svitrigaila¹³ who became Grand Prince of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (1430-1432), Grand Russian Duchy (1432-1440) and Grand Duchy of Volynia (1434-1452). The date when the Küçük Muhammad's host coin was struck supports the conclusion that such countermarks could not have been used before the Lithuanian wars ended in 1439, and not later than in the beginning of 1450s¹⁴.

The last coin that is described in this article was struck in the Principality of Wallachia during the reign of Vladislav II (1447, 1448-1456). The coin is a Wallachian ducat of common type, with almost invisible marks of usage (nr. 6). The Vladislav II coinage is still insufficiently studied. An attempt to define the various coin types struck in his reign was made only recently¹⁵. According to the classification proposed by A. Vlăduț and S. Gramaticu, the coin from the Stizhok hoard belongs to the post-reform coins and was struck in 1452-1456. Vladislav II introduced a monetary reform to overcome the national currency devaluation that coincided with an increase of Ottoman influence in the monetary market. As a result of the reform, two ducats with the average weight of 0.55 g became equal to one Ottoman silver asper¹⁶. The ducat from the Stizhok hoard is a heavy specimen of 0.60 g. This indicates that the coin was not circulated or circulated during a limited period of time.

¹¹ A. Gorođenko, *Dve monety žekanki Asprokastro*, Stratum plus, 6, 1999, p. 157; idem, *Monety žekanki Asprokastro* (Belgorod) iz lišnykh kolekcij, Labirint, 1, 2001, p. 8-9; idem, S. Curcuzov, *A coin of international circulation from Cetatea Albă*, Strabon, 1 (2003), 2005, 2, p. 45-47.

¹² E. Nicolae, *Date noi privind monedele și contramărcile de tip Asprokastro*, Studia Varia in Honorem Professoris Ștefan Ștefănescu Octogenarii, București-Belița, 2009, p. 221.

¹³ Ju. Borejša, A. Kazarov, *O nadžekankah 'Koljunn' Vitoiva Kejstatoriča i Svidrigajly Ol'geroviča*, Minsk, 2009, p. 40.

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 30.

¹⁵ A. Vlăduț, S. Gramaticu, *Despre ducatul lui Vladislav II, voievod al Țării Românești (1447-1448-1456)*, in Simpozion Chisnău 2001, p. 181-188.

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 185.

The six hoard coins demonstrate the rare, to some extent unique, structure of the Stizhok hoard¹⁷. The Wallachian ducat from the mid-fifteenth century is the rarest specimen in the hoard, as the coins of Vladislav II were struck in limited quantities. These ducats were previously not found further north than the Podolia hoard in Ukraine¹⁸. Moreover, even though Golden Horde aspers countermarked during Svitrigaila's reign were rather common in certain Ukrainian regions, the Asprokastro-countermarked aspers were previously only occasionally found in Ukraine. These specimens have usually been discovered alone, either in the former Cetatea Albă fortress¹⁹ or close to the Dniester river banks²⁰. There are only a few similar coins in the Cărpîți hoard²¹, the Kyrk-Er hoard²², the Kamianets-Podilskyi hoard and the Vilnius hoard²³, the Podolia hoard and the Bessarabia hoard²⁴. The Stizhok hoard of 2011 as well as the discovery of other hoards with Asprokastro-countermarked coins during the last decade, demonstrates how significant oriental silver aspers were in the Eastern European medieval money market. Likewise, it shows that Moldova played an important role in international transactions between North-East Europe and Italian colonies in Crimea, particularly Caffa.

CATALOG

Golden Horde Beg Sufi (1420-1422) Asper

1. AR, 0.69 g, 14x15 mm; partly visible inscription (obv.-rev.).
R.Z. Sagdeeva, *Serebrjannye monety hanov Zolotoj Ordy*, Moscow, 2005, no. 548.
Countermark on obverse: Greek cross between four roundels.

Sayyid Ahmad (1437-1459) Asper

2. AR, 0.70 g, 13x14 mm; almost illegible inscription (obv.-rev.).
R.Z. Sagdeeva, *op. cit.*, no. 599.
Countermark on reverse: Greek cross between four roundels.
3. AR, 0.62 g, 15x16 mm; illegible inscription (rev.).
R.Z. Sagdeeva, *ibidem*.
Countermark on obverse: Greek cross between four roundels.

¹⁷ The Stizhok hoard contents are similar to the contents of the Cărpîți hoard, now Victoria village, Iași County, Romania (O. Iliescu, M. Dinu, *op. cit.*, p. 342-345). There is also a similarity with the Podolia hoard found in 1862 and now unavailable to the scholars (E. Oberländer-Tarnoveanu, *A forgotten 19th century find of Wallachian and Moldavian coins: «Podolia» 1862*, CCDJ, 26, 2008, p. 97-130).

¹⁸ E. Oberländer-Tarnoveanu, *A forgotten . . .*, p. 97-130.

¹⁹ A.S. Kocievskij, *Nadžekanka tatarskih monet v srednevekovom Belgorode*, in Numizmatičeskie issledovanija

po istorii Jugo-Vostočnoj Evropy, Chisnău, 1990, p. 156-165.

²⁰ M. Ciocanu, *Kolekcia monet so srednevekovogo poselenija u s. Taraova*, Stratum plus, 2005-2009, 6, p. 351-369; E. Nicolae, *Date noi . . .*, p. 217-226.

²¹ O. Iliescu, M. Dinu, *op. cit.*, p. 342-345.

²² V.V. Majko, *Kyrk-Erskij klad gorodilisa Čufut-Kale v jugo-zapadnom Krymu*, Kiev, 2007.

²³ Ju. Borejša, A. Kazarov, *O nadžekankah . . .*, p. 3-42, especially p. 30.

²⁴ E. Oberländer-Tarnoveanu, *A forgotten . . .*, p. 97-130.



Fig. 1. Coins from the Stizhok hoard (Ukraine).



Fig. 2. Countermarks of Svtrigaila Olgerdovich: 'Gediminas Column' accompanied by four roundles.

Sayyid Ahmad ? (1437-1459)

Asper

4. AR, 0.66 g, 15 mm; inscriptions (obv.-rev.) are obliterated.

Cf. R.Z. Sagdeeva, *ibidem*.

Countermark on obverse: Greek cross between four roundles.

Küçük Muhammad (1430-1444)

Asper

5. AR, 0.61 g, 14x16 mm; hardly decipherable inscription (obv.-rev.)

R.Z. Sagdeeva, *op. cit.*, no. 595.

Two countermarks on reverse: Greek cross between four roundles; 'Gediminas Column' accompanied by four roundles.

Wallachia
Vladislav II (1447, 1448-1456)
 Ducat

Obv. +IWBAЯДHCЛЯBOHВДНЪ. Shield per pale, inside the coin inner circle: I field – a crescent and a six-point star, II field – three bars (barry of six).

Rev. +IWBAЯДН – СЛЯBOHВД. Eagle upon helmet regardant to the sinister and holding a cross in its beak.

6. AR, 0.60 g, 14 mm.

MBR, -: cf. p. 31-32, nos. 256-261, type I; A. Vilcu, S. Gramaticu, *Despre ducatul lui Vladislav II. voievod al Țării Românești (1447; 1448-1456)*, in Simpozion Chișinău 2001, p. 182-183, group Bb; <http://romaniancoins.ancients.info/vladislav2.htm> (visited 24.10.2011).