THE MYSTERY OF THE ILLYRIAN COWS – Illyrian Coinage in Thrace

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‘not content with making incursions merely into the neighbouring provinces of Thessaly and Dalmatia, (they) penetrated as far as the Adriatic; checked by the boundary which it formed, since nature apparently stayed their advance, they hurled their weapons against the very waters’.

(Florus, Epitomae de Titi Livio, Libri II, XXXVIII, III, 4)

One of the mysteries which has attracted the attention of archaeologists in southeastern Europe over the last decades has been the appearance of large amounts of Illyrian coinage from the Adriatic cities of Apollonia and Dyrrhachium (Epidamnus) in hoards from Serbia and northern Bulgaria dating from the first decades of the 1st c. BC. While the appearance of these coins in the Balkan interior has remained hitherto unexplained, a review of the larger geo-political picture in the region during this period reveals exactly how and when these issues reached the Balkan interior and Danubian region, and provides archaeological confirmation of events which have until now only been known from ancient sources.

THE HOARDS

The cities of Apollonia and Dyrrhachium (Epidamnus) were established in the Archaic period by Corcyra and her mother city Corinth on the eastern coast of the Adriatic Sea, in the Illyrian lands to the north of Epirus. When the Illyrian and Macedonian kingdoms threatened their prosperity in the last third of the 3rd century BC, they turned to the Romans for military support and subsequently assumed the privileged status of a Roman protectorate (Polybius 2.12.2, Appian, Ill. 7–8). As early as 228 BC these two Adriatic cities concluded an alliance with the Roman Republic. They served as Adriatic naval bases for the Republic and soon became centres of Roman operations in the interior of the Balkans. Essentially, the late drachms of Apollonia and Dyrrhachium were Roman controlled issues (Újes-Morgan 2012).
From the 3rd to the 1st century BC both cities issued the same type of smaller silver drachms, with the representation of a cow suckling her calf and the name of one magistrate in the nominative case on the obverse, and a double stellate or floral pattern in a double square and the name of another magistrate in the genitive case on the reverse (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1.

(after Ujes-Morgan 2010)

In the present context of most interest is the heavy concentration of drachms of Dyrrhachium and Apollonia to be observed in the territories of the Celtic Scordisci (in modern Serbia and Bulgaria). Some 30 hoards have been published from Serbia, and another 38 deposits from Northwestern and North-Central Bulgaria in the Vidin, Vratza, Montana, Pleven, Lovech and Gabrovo regions (Ujes Morgan D. 1st Century BC Drachms of Appolonia and Dyrrhachium in the Territory of the Scordisci. A Prologue to the Roman Conquest; Grigorova V., Prokopov I.. Les drachmes d’Apollonia et Dyrhachion en Illyrie dans la circulation monétaire en Thrace (Ile-Ier s. av. J.-C.). Trésors et fonds de musées bulgares contenant des monnaies d’Apollonia et Dyrrhachion. – Proceedings of the 8th International Congress of Thracology: Thrace and the Aegean, (Sofa – Yambol, 25–29 September 2000), Vol. 2, Sofia, 2002, 651–679; Paunov E., Prokopov I. An Inventory of Roman Republican Coin Hoards and Coins from Bulgaria (IRRCHBulg). Glaux \15, Milano, 2002).

A number of ‘barbarous’ imitations of Dyrrhachium and Apollonia and hybrid coins also appear in the hoards, and archaeological evidence for local imitation of
Dyrrhachium drachms is recorded at the Zboryanovo cult and civic centre – near Sveshtari in Razgrad region (Northeastern Bulgaria), where cast copies and a casting mould was discovered (Dzanev G. and Prokopov I. Numismatic Collection of the Historical Museum Razgrad (Anc. Abritus). In: Coin Collections and Coin Hoards from Bulgaria /CCCHBulg./ Volume I. Part 2. Sofia 2007).

The chronology of the hoards from Thrace containing Dyrrhachium and Appollonia drachms runs from the late 80’s to circa 60 BC, for example the hoards from northern Bulgaria such as those from Galatin (IRRCHBg 103), Koynare 1 (IRRCHBg 107) (both

Fig 2 – Appolonia and Dyrrhachium drachms in the Lovech museum collection (north-Central Bulgaria) (ICGH 616)

Vratza region), Vidin (Grigorova – Prokopov 2002, no. 17), or Trustenik (Pleven region) (IGCH 669).

Epidamnos-Dyrrhachium, Illyria. AR Drachm 18mm, 3.39 g. Arkephron and Asklapos, magistrates. ARCEFRWN, Cow standing left, suckling calf standing right; grain ear to right, bunch of grapes below / ASKLAPOU, Double stellate pattern. BMC 42

So what sequence of events brought such a large quantity of coins from the Adriatic to the Danube at the beginning of the 1st c. BC?

In fact, the link between the Balkan Celts and the Adriatic coast, and the circumstances which led to large amounts of these ‘Illyrian’ and other Roman issues reaching the territory of the Celts in Serbia and Bulgaria is well documented in Roman sources (See also ‘Damnatio Memoriae’ article).

By the beginning of the 1st c. BC the Roman forces on the Balkans were feeling the strain of the apparently endless barbarian attacks from the north. In 90 BC the dam finally burst and, confronted by yet another Celtic/Maidi attack, the Roman borders disintegrated (on these events see ‘The Scordisci Wars’ article). The events which followed are described by the Roman historian Florus (Epitome of Roman History XXXVIII, iii, 4). The Celtic tribes, now joined by the Maidi and Denteletes, as well as the Dardanii tribes, swarmed through Macedonia, Thessaly and Dalmatia, even reaching the Adriatic coast. According to the Roman historian:

“Throughout their advance they left no cruelty untried, as they vented their fury on their prisoners; they sacrificed to their gods with human blood; they drank out of human skulls;
by every kind of insult inflicted by burning and fumigation they made death more foul; they even forced infants from their mother’s wombs by torture”.

In this litany of evil atrocities committed by their enemies, special mention is reserved by the Romans for the Celts – “The cruelest of all the Thracians were the Scordisci, and to their strength was added cunning as well” (loc cit.).

While much of the above account may be put down to Roman hysteria and exaggeration, it is clear that from 90 BC onwards the empire had lost de facto control over large parts of the Balkans and northern Greece. By 88 BC, i.e. 2 years after the collapse of the Roman borders in Macedonia, the Scordisci and their allies had swept through northern Greece and reached Dodona in Epirus, where they destroyed the temple of Zeus. By the winter of 85/84 BC they had penetrated as far as Delphi, where the most sacred of Greek temples was once again destroyed (see ‘The Scordisci Wars’ article).

As mentioned, during the course of these attacks/raids we are specifically told that the ‘barbarians’ also reached the Adriatic coast (in Adriaticum mare usque venerunt), and it is exactly in the wake of these events that Illyrian coinage from the Adriatic cities of Appolonia and Dyrrhachium begins to appear in hoards in Scordisci territory in Serbia and northern Bulgaria, thus indicating that it reached this area of the Balkan interior and the Danube region as a direct result of the historically recorded Celtic campaigns against the Romans in the western Balkans in the 2nd decade of the 1st c. BC.