

Moneta falsa et alia- Money in Crisis in Byzantine Egypt: the Case of "Marea"/ Philoxenite

Of the 8,500 coins discovered as part of the Polish research at the Byzantine site of 'Marea'/Philoxenite in Egypt, Byzantine coins account for 20 per cent. Among them are irregular coins, i.e. all kinds of imitations, cast copies, countermarked coins and hybrids. These finds testify to the economic crisis in which the Byzantine Empire entered at the end of the sixth and first half of the seventh century. The problem of irregular coins has not been explored more thoroughly so far, leaving an important gap in the study of Byzantine economics, a niche the following project intends to cover.

For irregular coins in the early Byzantine period, the term imitation is most commonly used. In the case of finds from Egypt, however, this term is insufficient. In addition to actual imitations, i.e. coins imitating official Byzantine money, there are also copies of coins produced in casting moulds. Furthermore, local authorities, realising the scarcity of perfunctory money, decided on various ventures such as putting new stamps on old coins or countermarking them. All these types were found during the research at 'Marei'/Philoxenite.

Thus, the project should initially divide irregular coins according to four characteristics: production method, metrology, style and legality. Two techniques were used to produce the coins: minting and casting. There are coins with reduced weight and diameter as well as irregular coins that are not different metrologically from their originals. Regarding style, we may distinguish between examples that are exact replicas of official coins and those that are only stylized versions of them, with varying degrees of likeness. Finally, as far as the legitimacy of the coins is concerned, besides obvious forgeries, such as cast copies or imitations, there were also coins countermarked or overstruck by the local authorities in Alexandria. Using these four characteristics, it was possible to tentatively identify three groups of irregular coins.

1. minted imitations of official coins, which usually do not differ in weight or diameter. The images shown are simplified and the letters are illegible or modified.
2. cast copies with reduced weight and diameter. They show remnants of casting channels created during the manufacturing process.
3. official coins, which were subsequently modified by the addition of countermarks, or re-minted.

The diversity of the above categories testifies to the varied ways in which the scarcity of numismatic money was dealt with. Which triggers research questions about the circumstances of the origin and chronology of irregular coins. Further on whether irregular coins were widely accepted and their production was prosecuted by the authorities. This project, through the analysis of coins from 'Marei'/Philoxenite, intends to answer.

The project includes a numismatic and metallographic study of the irregular coins discovered at 'Marei'/Philoxenite. The results achieved will be compared with archaeological material from other sites and regions of the Byzantine Empire. This is the first project in which an attempt will be carried out to classify irregular Byzantine coins from Egypt.