

Monetary circulation and provincial society in the Roman settlement of Ilișua (Dacia)

The modern village of Ilișua (Romania, Bistrița-Năsăud county) is located in Northern Transylvania, a few kilometers North of the Someșul Mare river, between the towns of Dej and Beclean. During the existence of Roman Dacia (AD 106-274), this spot was situated right in the middle of the Northern provincial border. Here existed a Roman auxiliary fort and its neighboring civilian settlement, a *vicus* with unknown ancient name (Gudea 1997, p. 53-54, no. 29).

Since the conquest a Roman garrison was installed in this strategic position. In the years of Trajan a small timber fort was built here, for an infantry *cohors*. Subsequently, under the rule of Hadrian, a cavalry unit, the *ala I Tungrorum Frontoniana*, built a new larger timber fortification. This garrison lasted at Ilișua till the end of the Roman province. It erected, later, the stone defence walls of the same Roman camp (Gudea 1997, p. 53; Protase *et alii* 1997, p. 67-68, 77-78).

Many archaeological finds originate from Ilișua. The first systematic excavations were performed by Károly Torma, in the middle of the XIXth century (Torma 1865). Large scale archaeological researches took place from 1978 to 1995 (Protase *et alii* 1997). These efforts focused on the auxiliary fort first, and the *vicus* in the proximity was very little touched. The results were published; therefore we dispose of much more information about this camp than about most of the similar fortifications in this area. Since 1996 further excavations are taking place, focusing on the civilian settlement¹.

These recent researches discovered a large number of ancient coins. Among these items, 299 were published completely, each of them with the archaeological context of the find (Protase *et alii* 1997, p. 79-94). It means, they would be fit for a special "archaeological-numismatic research". The 115 coins published by K. Torma are not in the same situation; their archaeological context is unknown, the technical data were not listed, and they were classified by H. Finály using the

first edition of the worldwide known work of H. Cohen (Torma 1865, p. 23 ff). Other 69 coins were found in the last investigations (1996-1999) and have not been published yet. With 484 discovered ancient coins, the Roman fort of Ilișua can be considered among the best numismatically documented sites of similar size in Dacia (Găzdac 2002, p. 78).

A scientific research of this heritage meant, first of all, a new classification of the older finds, first published by K. Torma². After that step, we compiled a general catalogue of the coin finds from Ilișua. On this basis we tried to get a general view about the monetary circulation in the ancient settlement of Ilișua, as far as possible. It is noteworthy that most of the available coin finds originate right from the Roman camp. Therefore the conclusions will mirror especially the economic life inside the fortified area.

The chronological structure of the finds offers a wide view over the evolution of the Roman life at Ilișua (see *Appendix 1*).

The earliest coins are three republican denarii of the 1st century BC. As far as in Ilișua no pre-Roman settlement is attested (Protase *et alii* 1997, p. 67), it is obvious that these pieces circulated in the first decades of the Roman province as well. The same holds true for the imperial pre-Trajanic issues; not only their series is discontinued, but also their average numbers of entries per year are clearly inferior to the post-conquest ones. One knows that in Dacia the pre-Roman market was dominated by the Roman republican denarius (Mihăilescu-Bîrlița 1993, p. 41-43), and that the early imperial coins of the 1st century AD are circulating as brought by the military and colonists in the new province (Ardevan 1991, p. 225).

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1. The archaeological team is directed by Prof. Dr. D. Protase ("Babes-Bolyai" University, Cluj-Napoca).
 2. We express here our gratitude to Mrs. Oltea Dudau (Brukenthal Museum, Sibiu), who performed this new classification.

The coin entries grow spectacularly under Trajan, a quite normal phenomenon. The maintaining of this level of entries (even a little larger) under Hadrian is a special feature of this area. We think it must be connected with the garrison changement, the coming of an *ala* and the erection of the new fort (Protase *et alii* 1997, p. 68). The rhythm of the economic life seems to be slower in the years of Antoninus Pius, because the coefficient of the coin entries per year is much smaller (2.65 to 4.28). One has to think at an influence of certain destabilizing events which affected North-eastern Dacia about the middle of the IInd century, too (Găzdac 2002, p. 57).

A very strong reduction of the coin entries per year takes place under Marcus Aurelius; it is a rather normal evolution, only its proportions in Ilișua seem greater compared to other Romano-Dacian settlements (Găzdac 2002, p. 77-79). Because Dacia Porolissensis was less damaged by the Marcomannic wars (Gudea 1994, p. 375-376), this evolution must be due to the general situation of the province, but maybe to its local aggravation as well (a departure of the troops in a longer campaign beyond the frontiers?). As overall in Northern Dacia, the situation will not become better in the years of Commodus.

The recovery and growth is visible during the reign of Septimius Severus, nevertheless smaller as in other contemporary settlements of Roman Dacia (Găzdac 2002, p. 76, 78). It is astonishing that the level of the coin entries per year remains smaller compared to the one registered in the first half of the IInd century AD, being just a little greater as it was under Antoninus Pius. Even this level decreases under Caracalla and Elagabalus. The growth under Severus Alexander remains rather tiny and never reaches the money quantities of Septimius Severus' years. All the available data mirror a limited economical relaunching for the Severan age, under the level of the first half of the IInd century, and anyway without the general boom which occurs in the province under Elagabalus and Severus Alexander (Găzdac 2002, p. 91-92). It seems that the settlement of Ilișua was less connected to the general, favorable trend, of the Severan age.

Finally, the period of military anarchy offers surprises. Under Maximinus Thrax and Gordianus III the economic life visibly declines. But we face an unexpected growth of the coin entries per year during the reign of Philippus Arabs, their number reaching now

a peak. However, this is to be regarded with caution. First, this growth happens because of the new provincial issues - the "Provincia Dacia" bronze coins, which were struck right in Dacia (Ardevan 1996, p. 122). Second, after this peak moment, every monetary circulation in this Roman camp ceased. We think that the short boom of Roman Dacia under Philippus Arabs should have been decisively influenced by some administrative measures, and that it did not last long (Ardevan 1991, p. 231). The case of Ilișua confirms this previous impression.

It is important to underline that in Ilișua no monetary circulation exists after the middle of the IIIrd century AD. Neither archaeological evidence nor coin finds attest a Roman settlement on this spot after the abandonment of the province (Protase *et alii* 1997, p. 78). Without taking into account the exact moment and the circumstances of the Roman withdrawal, one has to notice the lack of any later Roman life in the former fort.

Not only the chronology of the numismatic sources is relevant for the evolution and specific features of the Roman settlement, but also their composition by denominations (see *Appendix 2*).

Among the pre-Trajanic coins one notices the predominance of the silver pieces (23 to 14). This reality is not surprising, if one recalls that they were brought by the troops. But their proportion in the Antonine times is surprising: not at all like in other Romano-Dacian researched sites, during the whole IInd century AD the number of the bronze pieces remains greater compared to the one of the silver coins (188 to only 62). The fact is noteworthy and it seems to contradict a common opinion –the preponderance of the silver coins in the Roman military areas (Găzdac 2002, p. 67-69). Of course, even if the soldiers received their payments in silver money, they had to change it in smaller currency for the needs of the everyday life. One could think at a larger role of the civilians from the neighboring *vici*, but in this case the great majority of the finds come from the very Roman fortification. Anyway, the fact remains noted. Maybe the numismatic research of Roman Dacia has to revise its older ideas and to accept a more important role of the bronze coins in the province, even in the border fortifications.

The dramatic decrease of the bronze coins in the monetary circulation of the IIIrd century is not surprising; it fits with the well documented general trend.

Indeed, one has to connect this fact with the monetary policy of the emperors, too, who struck less bronze at that time (Callu 1969, p. 114-115; Clay 1989, p. 219 f). Another feature of that period is the higher percentage of the plated and debased coins. Their gravity in Ilișua remains always important and rather constant, like in other Roman frontier settlements (Gazdac 2002, p. 69). One has to underline the find of some bronze cast coins, the so-called *limesfalsa*, a workshop producing such items must have functioned then in this settlement (Ardevan 2002). But the billon *denarii* vanished right at the time when the *antoniniani* started dominating the market. This is a general phenomenon in the monetary circulation of the Roman world, the radiate coins in bad alloy replacing the older debased money (Mattingly 1967, p. 132; Peter 2001, p. 245 –especially footnotes 817 and 818). A radical modification of the circulating currency occurred only in the reign of Philippus Arabs: the impressive and unusually high percentage of the bronze coins (20 from 26 finds). Actually, it is about the obvious –but ephemeral– domination of the Dacian provincial issues, which represented then 95 % of the bronze coins and 73 % of the total ones (see also Gazdac 2002, p. 70-71). We appreciate that it mirrors a deliberate state policy, which tried to stand the economic life through the use of the provincial coinage (even for the payment of the troops?). But this conjuncture didn't last longer. After 249 AD. not only in Ilișua every monetary circulation is missing, but overall in Northern and Central Dacia the provincial coins were almost no more in use (Gazdac 2002, p. 73). This peculiar case underlines the ephemeral success of the Philippic revival.

Civic coins occur in Ilișua on a much reduced scale. Except the “Provincia Dacia” issues mentioned above, we found only five such bronze pieces. A damaged one could be a *sestertius* struck either in Dacia or in Viminacium. Two other items are bronze Greek coins of the imperial age (one for Caracalla, the other one for Severus Alexander), struck by cities that we can no longer identify. The only one easy to attribute is an issue of the Bithynian town of Nicea for Severus Alexander. These coins bring an “exotic” note in the local monetary circulation. Their use has to be placed in the first decades of the IIIrd century AD, when such coinage becomes more important overall in the Danubian provinces (Gazdac 2002, p. 41, 88). But their small number shows equally the reduced gravity of the far trade and wider economical relations for this little provincial settlement, deprived of good

trade connections and located on a less circulated road. The population of Ilișua, living around a fort, seems not to have enjoyed important foreign connections, beyond the zonal ones.

One more piece requires a special attention. This is a bronze coin struck in 133 AD by the rebelled Judea under Simon Bar-Kochba (Protase *et alii* 1997, p. 85, no. 128). Such issues belong to the time of Hadrian, when the civic coins are generally scarce in Roman Dacia, and especially in such remote border *vici* as Ilișua (Gazdac 2002, p. 72). Its chronology differs totally from the above cited civic coins'. Its weight system makes its use and change in the Greco-Roman world very difficult. More than this, the Judaic coins of the years 130-133 are extremely scarce in Dacia (only three pieces were found up to now), and very rare in the whole Empire, too (Gudea 2000, p. 187, 192-194). For good reasons, such a find was appreciated not as a proof of normal trade connections, but as an item with symbolic value: either war loot for a Roman soldier, or a memory of the state of Israel and of the Jewish ideals –for a Jewish group in the *diaspora*. As the Ilișua troops didn't participate in the Hadrian's Judaic war, the second interpretation of this find seems more appropriate. The coin was found in an archaeological layer of the IIIrd century, therefore it must have been lost much later than its confection, in a moment when its successive possessors were probably no longer aware of its symbolic message. Consequently, this small metallic item is to be considered among the few proofs of an effective existence of the Jewish communities in Roman Dacia (Gudea 2000, p. 187). Roman Ilișua must have had such a community. Taking into account the specific features of this ancient settlement, we suppose that this presence here was not important and played no major role. It has to be dated in the years of the Bar-Kochba's uprising or shortly after.

In conclusion, one can assert that the general shape of the monetary circulation from Ilișua draws the image of a Roman provincial community endowed with some specific features. The settlement was founded soon after the conquest, because of a garrison, and it preserved always a military look. One has to pay attention to its worse circumstances for a developed trade economy –missing good connections with the main commercial roads, lacking important resources or a large Barbarian population in the proximity. The settlement was less connected to the great far trade or to the main zonal trends. Its maximal development took place during the

first half of the IInd century, while in the second one it had to face certain stagnation and even an obvious crisis. The new ascension in the Severan age is less visible for this area, and it never brought a similar welfare as during the rule of the first Antonines. Local fabrication of cast coins is important as well, it shows the need of money and the development of a monetary economy in this border region (Ardevan 2002, p. 41). After 235 AD, the general crisis of the Roman world touched this settlement too, and hurted badly the local society; only a short period, the last three years of Philippus' reign, was different. One still has to explain the big occurrence of the bronze provincial coins in the local economic life, and their later extinction. In conclusion, Roman Ilișua shows the main features of a fully provincial settlement, especially in comparison with other investigated military *vici* from Roman Dacia.

The end of the Roman monetary circulation in Ilișua is a different problem. In this respect, this settlement looks like most of the contemporary communities from Eastern and Central Transylvania, i. e. no more

coins after Philippus Arabs (Găzdac 2002, p. 78, 80-81). Archaeological items dating surely after the middle of the IIIrd century are missing as well (Protase *et alii* 1997, p. 78). But it is questionable if this reality can prove the earlier abandonment of Eastern Roman Dacia or the Roman withdrawal in the years of Gallienus (Ruscu 2003, p. 166-172). The dissolution of the monetary circulation is a consequence of the deep general crisis of the Roman world. Of course, the manifestations of the crisis had to be stronger and more effective in the remote and less developed areas, which were less connected with the wide world. Ilișua represented right such a case. Therefore, the local community could have lasted even after 250 AD, but in a poor and diminished form, as a humble village, without its former main economic role in the region (crafts and commerce). Anyway, the Roman settlement vanished by the last quarter of the IIIrd century, without any local successor. Archaeological evidence attests for this lapse of time only some small Barbarian dwellings in the former Roman fort, i. e. an intruded foreign group (Protase *et alii* 1997, p. 78).

Abbreviations

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Illustrations

- Fig. 1 The defence system of Roman Dacia (after Gudea 1997). No. 29 is Ilișua
- Fig. 2 Dacia Porolissensis and its Roman garrisons (after Gudea 1994)
- Fig. 3 The location of the Roman camp from Ilișua among the modern settlements (after Protase *et alii* 1997)
- Fig. 4 Plan of the Roman fort from Ilișua (after Protase *et alii* 1997)
- Fig. 5 The monetary circulation in Roman Ilișua (diagram)

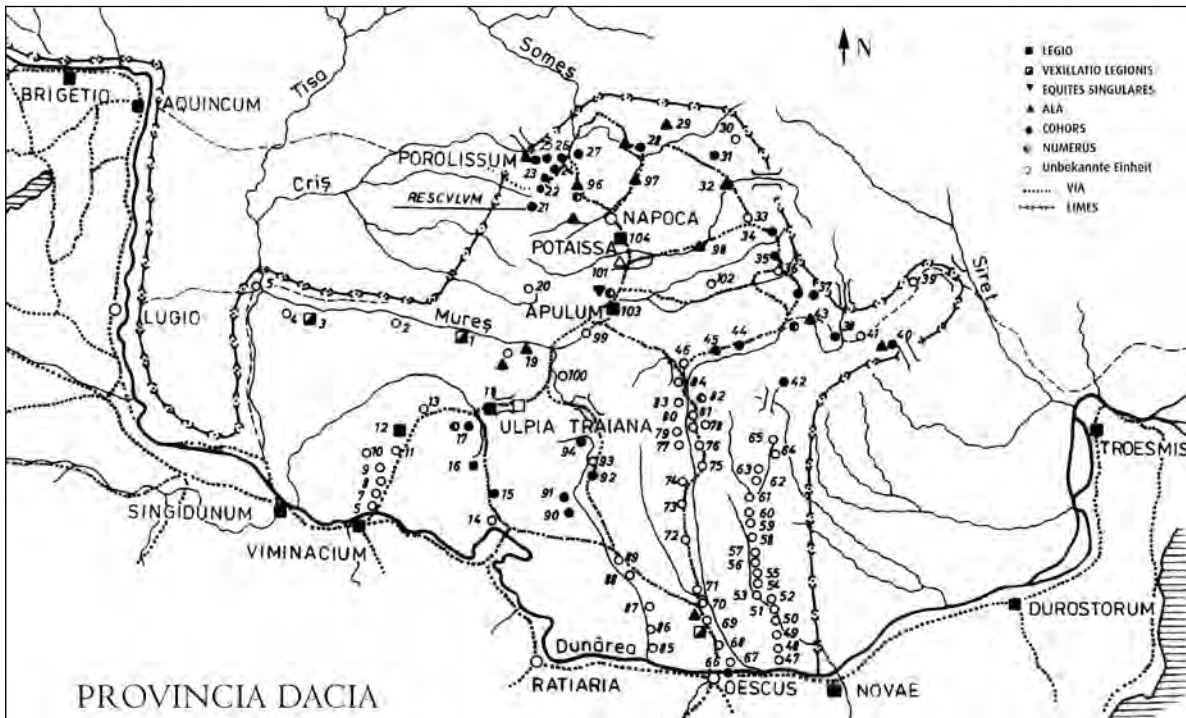


Fig. 1

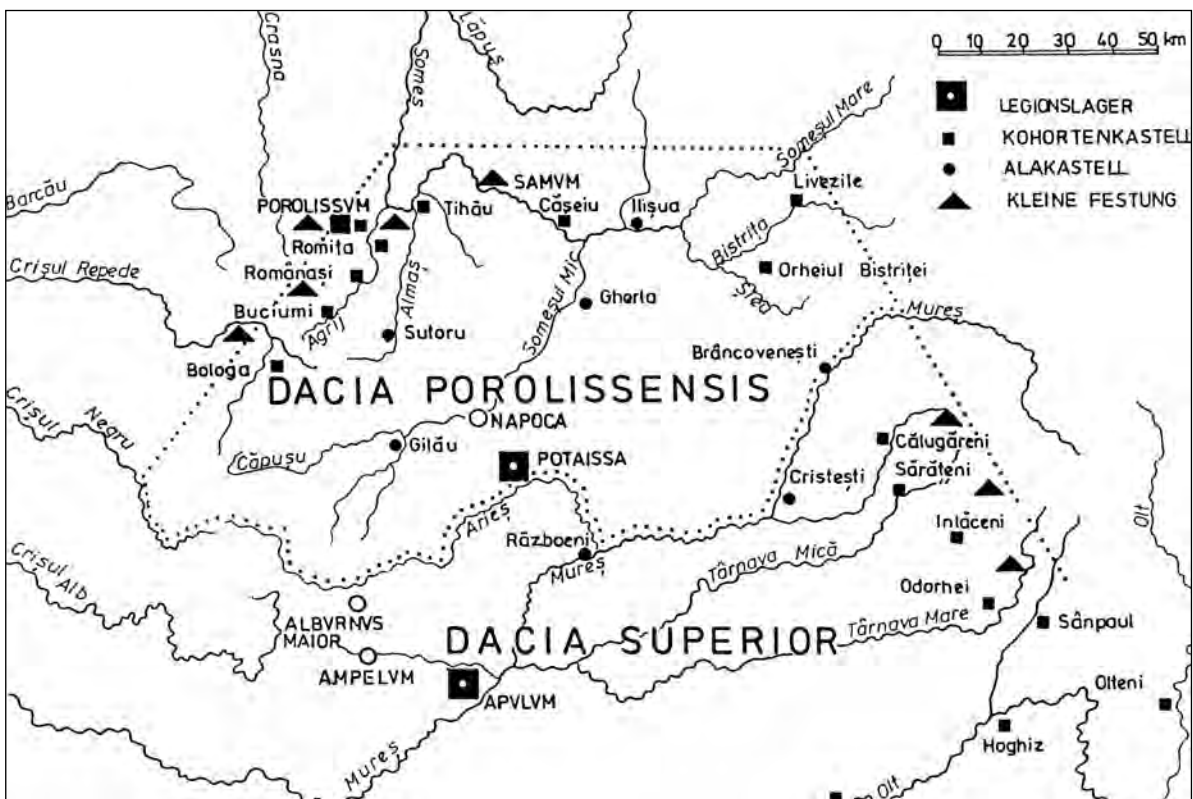


Fig. 2

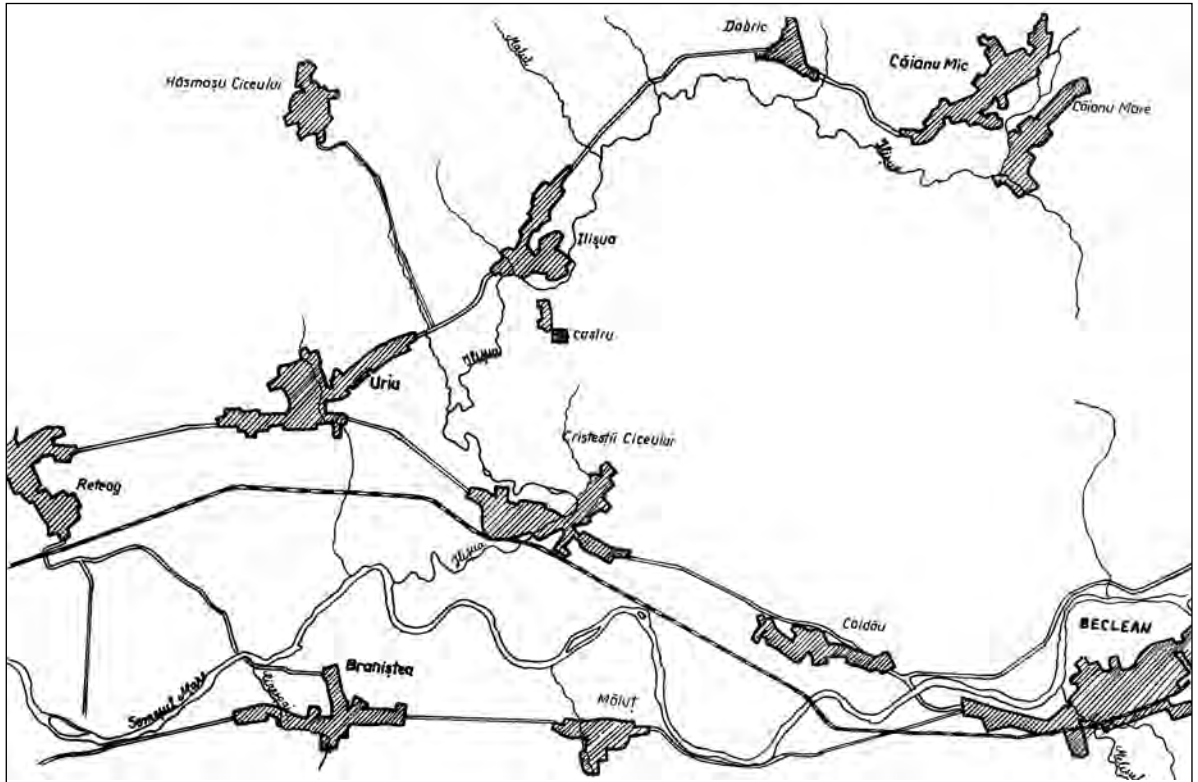


Fig. 3

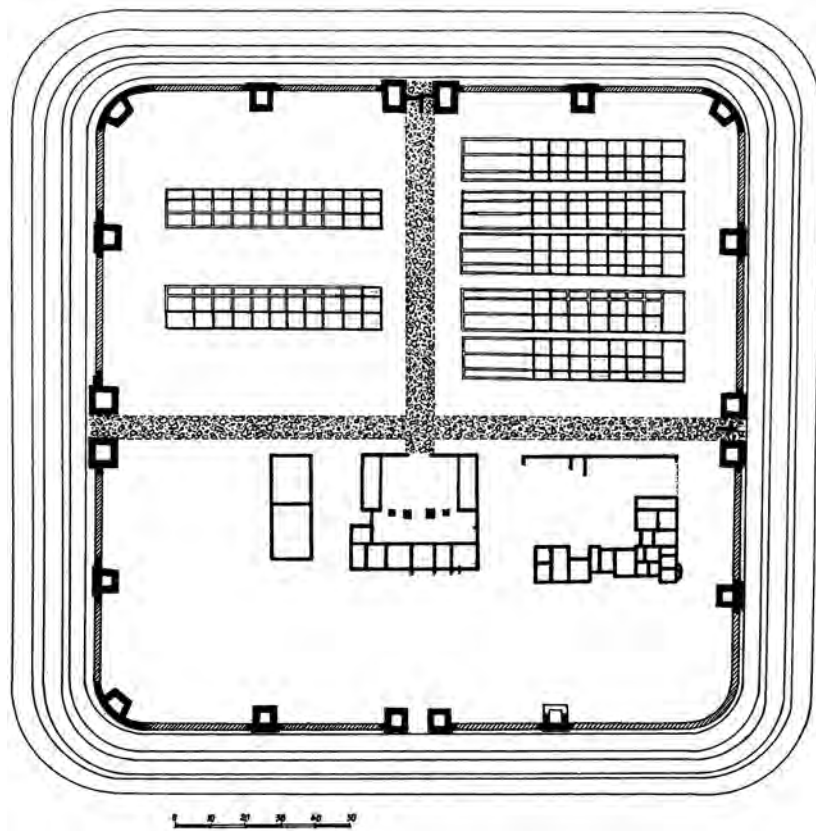


Fig. 4

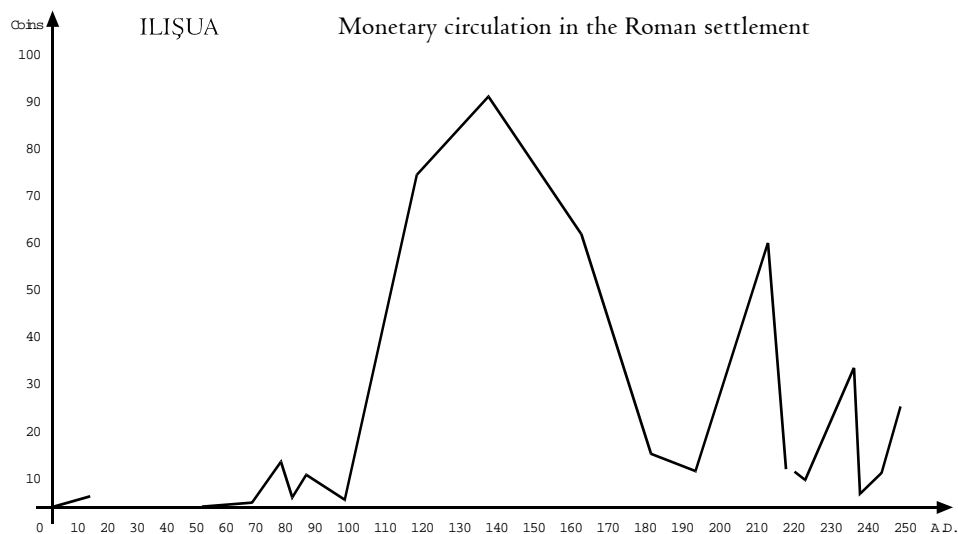


Fig. 5

ILISUA - Table of the coin finds

Crt. No.	Issuer	No. coins			% of total			Coeff. entries / year		
		AR	AE	Total	AR	AE	Total	AR	AE	Total
1	Republic	3	-	3	0.62	-	0.62	-	-	-
2	Augustus	1	2	3	0.20	0.41	0.62	0.02	0.04	0.06
3	Tiberius	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
4	Caligula	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
5	Claudius	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
6	Nero	1	-	1	0.20	-	0.20	0.02	-	0.02
7	Vespasian	8	6	14	1.65	1.23	2.89	0.80	0.60	1.40
8	Titus	3	-	3	0.62	-	0.62	1.50	-	1.50
9	Domitian	7	4	11	1.44	0.82	2.27	0.43	0.25	0.68
10	Nerva	-	2	2	0.41	-	0.41	-	1.00	1.00
11	Trajan	12	62	74	2.47	12.80	15.28	0.63	3.26	3.89
12	Hadrian	17	73	90	3.51	15.08	18.59	0.80	3.47	4.28
13	Ant. Pius	22	39	61	4.54	8.05	12.60	0.95	1.69	2.65
14	M. Aurelius	7	7	14	1.44	1.44	2.89	0.36	0.36	0.73
15	Commodus	4	7	11	0.82	1.44	2.27	0.33	0.58	0.91
16	Anarchy	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
17	S. Severus	58	2	60	11.98	0.41	12.39	3.22	0.11	3.33
18	Caracalla	10	1	11	2.06	0.20	2.27	1.66	0.16	1.83
19	Macrinus	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
20	Elagabalus	9	-	9	1.85	-	1.85	2.25	-	2.25
21	Sev. Alex.	28	6	34	5.78	1.23	7.02	2.15	0.46	2.61
22	Maximinus	2	-	2	0.41	-	0.41	0.66	-	0.66
23	Gordian III	10	1	11	2.06	0.20	2.27	1.66	0.16	1.83
24	Philippus	6	21	27	1.23	4.33	5.57	1.20	4.20	5.40
25	Unidentified	11	32	43	2.27	6.61	8.88	-	-	-
TOTAL		219	265	484	45.24	54.75				

Appendix 1

ILIŞUA - Table of the coin finds by denominations

Crt. No.	Issuer	AR						AE					TOTAL
		D	Q	BillD	PlatD	Ant	PlatAnt	HS	Dp	As	Quadr	Civic	
1	Republic	3											3
2	Augustus	1								2			3
3	Nero	1											1
4	Vespasian	8							2	4			14
5	Titus	3											3
6	Domitian	6			I			I	I	2			11
7	Nerva							I	I				2
8	Trajan	5		2	4			13	15	34		I	74
9	Hadrian	14		2	I			10	19	42		2	90
10	Ant. Pius	17		3	2			16	7	16			61
11	M. Aurelius	3		2	2			3	2	2			14
12	Commodus	3			I			5		2			11
13	S. Severus	31		11	16							2	60
14	Caracalla	4		2	4							I	11
15	Elagabal	5			3	I							9
16	Sev. Alex.	20	I	3	4			4				2	34
17	Maximinus	2											2
18	Gordian III				4	5	I	I					11
19	Philippus					5	I	I				20	27
20	Unidentified	2		I	8			I	I	25	2	3	43
TOTAL		128	I	26	50	11	2	56	48	129	2	31	484

Appendix 2