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## TWO SARMATIAN COIN IMITATIONS FROM A LATE SARMATIAN GRAVE AT BÉKÉSSZENTANDRÁS

Lajos JUHÁSZ\* 

*A child in the Late Sarmatian cemetery at Békésszentandrás-Fabó-tanya was buried with two Sarmatian coin imitations. Both coins were struck with the same obverse die and the reverses of both were decorated with stars and a crescent. The archaeological context of such coins is rarely known, although a few have been recovered from graves. For example, another burial in the same cemetery also contained some, confirming the assumption that these coins with a moon-and-star and crescent reverse served as amulets.*

*Békésszentandrás-Fabó-tanya késő szarmata temetőjében az egyik gyermeket két szarmata éremutánzzal helyezték végső nyugalomra, amelyek ráadásul előlapi verőtögyezést mutatnak. Az ilyen típusú tárgyaknak csak ritkán ismert a régészeti kontextusa, bár egyes darabok sírokból kerültek elő, ahogy e temető egy másik sírjából is. Ez tovább erősíti az eddigi feltételezést, miszerint ezek a hold és csillag hátlapos éremutánzatok amulett funkcióval rendelkeztek.*

Keywords: *Sarmatian, coin imitation, child burial, amulet*

Kulcsszavak: *szarmata, éremutánzat, gyermeksír, amulett*

In the summer of 2017, preventive archaeological excavations were carried out south of Békésszentandrás, preceding the construction of Road M44. A Late Sarmatian cemetery was unearthed at Fabó-tanya by József Szarka and a team of archaeologists from the Tessedik Sámuel Museum of Szarvas. They found altogether 34 Late Sarmatian graves and three Sarmatian burials that were not possible to date more accurately, as well as fourteen beehive-shaped pits and Sarmatian and late medieval trenches (Szarka 2017).

The south-north directed grave no. 259 (feature 109), an inhumation burial containing the poorly preserved skeletal remains of a child, is of particular interest (Fig. 1). Of the bones, only the skull, the jaw- (alongside the traces of a couple of ribs about 15 cm to the north), and a leg bone were preserved. Because of its poor state, it was not possible to determine the position in which the deceased was laid to rest, neither whether the grave was looted or not. Several glass beads (Fig. 2, 1–2), two coins (Fig. 2, 3–4) and a brooch (Fig. 2, 5) were deposited next to the jaw, some more beads (Fig. 2, 6) next to the leg,

and a grey ceramic vessel (Fig. 2, 7) in the northern end of the grave. A heavily corroded semicircular iron object was discovered above the coins.

From this paper's point of view, the two copper coins, both so-called Sarmatian imitations, are of importance.<sup>1</sup>

No. 1 (grave good nr. 3) (Fig. 4)

Inv. Nr. 2018.3.259.5.

AE, 1.31 g, d = 17 mm

Obverse: IIII – III

Bust facing left.

Reverse: IIIIIIIII

Crescent and floral motif.

No. 2 (grave good nr. 4) (Fig. 5)

Inv. Nr. 2018.3.259.6.

AE 1.66 g, d = 17 mm

Obverse: IIII – III

Bust facing left.

Reverse: IIIIIIIII

Crescent and floral motif.

▷ Received 23. 05. 2022 | Accepted 15. 09. 2022 | Published online 06. 03. 2023

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Fig. 1 Grave no. 259 at Békésszentandrás-Fabó-tanya  
1. kép Békésszentandrás-Fabó-tanya 259. sírja



Fig. 2 Detail of grave no. 259 with the jaw, glass beads (1–2) and a brooch (5)  
2. kép A 259. sír részletfotója az állkapoccsal, üvegyöngyökkel (1–2), a két szarmata éremutánnal (3–4) és fibulával (5)



Both coins have left-facing busts and crescent-and-floral motif. There is a difference in their condition, as no. 2 is not as heavily worn as no. 1. The two obverses come from the same die, while the two reverses show some differences. Both were pierced after they had been struck, as the relative positions of the holes differ above the head. The busts are decorated with criss-crosses representing the cuirass, while, interestingly, there are two curved lines at the shoulders, most likely indicating a *pteryges* or cloak. A similar armour, its top part depicted with curved lines, is visible on another Sarmatian coin imitation in the Hungarian National Museum's collection, although in that case, the curved lines are missing at the shoulders, and can only be seen at the neck (Gohl 1904, 85, no. 18). The coins are difficult to date, but the busts resemble early 4<sup>th</sup>-century Roman coins.

The term “Sarmatian imitation” was coined by Ö. Gohl in an article at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century for pieces of approximately 17–21 mm (AE 3) in diameter, struck of copper or copper alloy. Two cast lead specimens are exceptions proving the rule (Juhász 2021). The legends being reduced to merely I and O letters, as well as their depictions are easy to distinguish from genuine Roman coins. The reason for associating these imitations with Sarmatians was due to their low quality and distribution, mainly outside the Roman Empire. They show a concentration in the Middle Tisza Region, but also appear along the Danube and in the territory of modern-day Serbia (Fig. 3; Juhász 2021, 138–139). Recently, some were even discovered outside the Carpathian Basin, in Ukraine, Poland, Bulgaria, and Moldova (Anohin 2015, 205, 2, 8; Varbanov et al. 2019, 126).

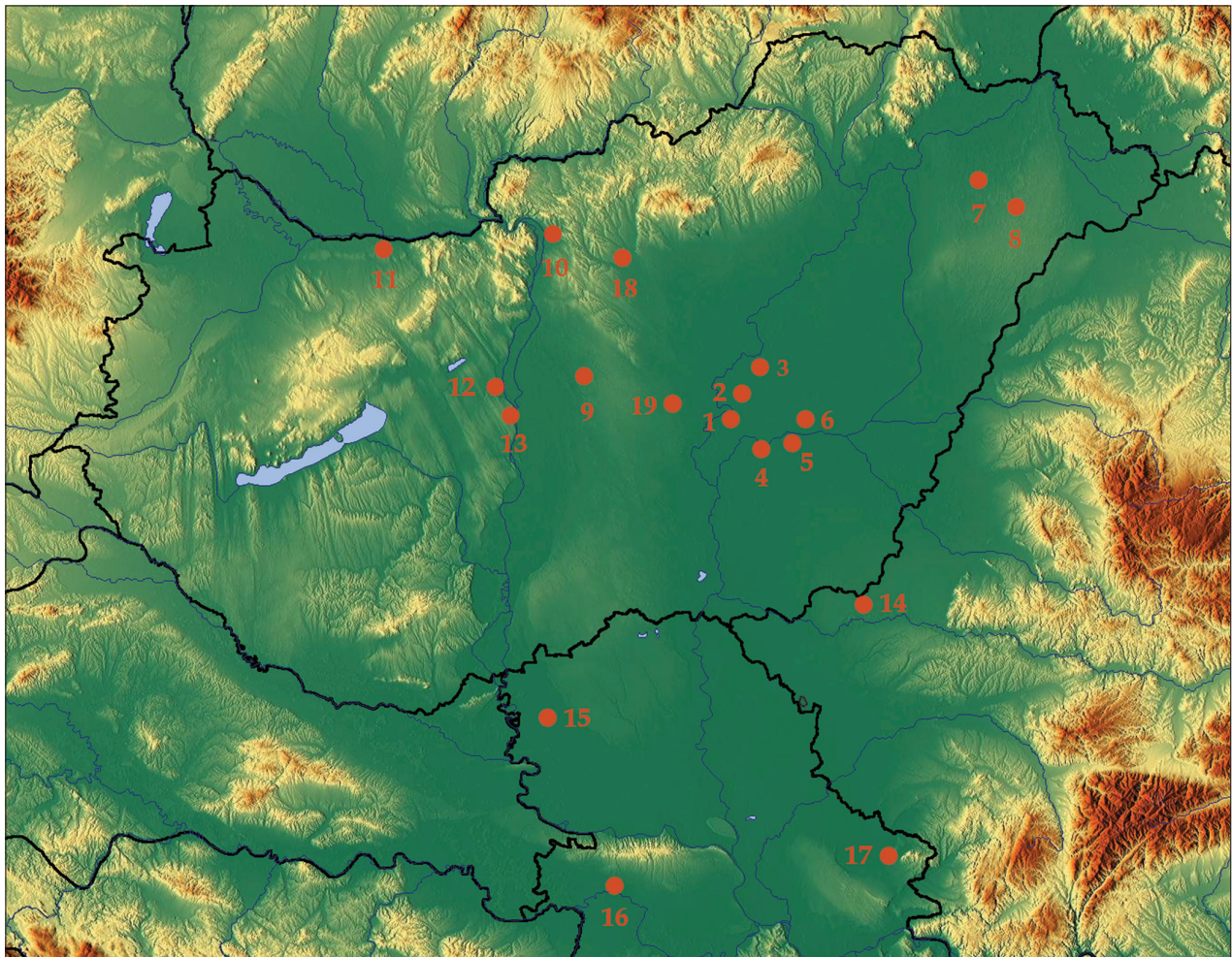


Fig. 3 Sarmatian coin imitations with star-and-crescent reverse in the Carpathian Basin  
3. kép Hold és csillag hátlapos szarmata éremutánzatok a Kárpát-medencében

- 1: Martfű; 2: Kengyel; 3: Törökszentmiklós; 4: Békésszentandrás; 5: Szarvas; 6: Mezőtúr; 7: Nyíregyháza; 8: Pócspetri;  
9: Pusztavacs; 10: Vác; 11: Brigetio/Szőny; 12: Adony/Rácalmás; 13: Dunaújváros/Intercisa; 14: Pecica/Pécska;  
15: Sombor/Zombor; 16: Sremska Mitrovica/Sirmium; 17: Vršac/Versec; 18: Tura; 19: Törtel





Fig. 4 Sarmatian coin imitation from grave no. 259 in Békésszentandrás-Fabó-tanya (grave good no. 3)  
4. kép Szarmata éremutánzat Békésszentandrás-Fabó-tanya 259. sírjából (3. melléklet)



Fig. 5 The second Sarmatian coin imitation from grave no. 259 in Békésszentandrás-Fabó-tanya (grave good no. 4)  
5. kép Szarmata éremutánzat Békésszentandrás-Fabó-tanya 259. sírjából (4. melléklet)

They did not have a monetary function but were used as amulets, as indicated not only by their very non-Roman appearance but also the fact that they were always pierced or looped to be wearable.<sup>2</sup> The pieces from Mezőtúr-Leski-domb and Zakarpatia Oblast (Ukraine) still have parts of the metal necklaces preserved (Vaday 1989, 259, 203, 2; Anohin 2015, 205, 2).

Gohl distinguished between two categories of Sarmatian imitations: one in the fashion of various late 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>-century Roman reverses, and another with the star-and-crescent motif. Variants in the latter range from very simple to a more complex floral-like ornamentation, but the homogeneity in the choice of subject indicates the working of a deeper common ideology. The inspiration was most likely provided by 2<sup>nd</sup>-century *denarii* (e.g., the ones minted by Hadrian showing the *septentriones* or Plough constellation), quite common in the Hungarian Barbaricum.<sup>3</sup> At the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, these images were minted with AETERNITAS and SAECVLI

FELICITAS legends, symbolising eternity and the Golden Age (RIC IV.1 Pescennius Niger 1, 73–74, Septimius Severus 360, 416–418, 527, Julia Domna 629). Similar reverses were also minted on provincial coins, which are generally rare in the Carpathian Basin (Juhász 2020, 140).

Previously, Sarmatian coin imitations were mainly known from museum collections, without findspot. In the last decade – thanks to metal detectorists –, such finds have been discovered in an ever-growing number from known locations; still, these are also stray finds without closed context. This fact only stresses the importance of the grave from Békésszentandrás. However, the site produced another striking discovery (previously published in Juhász 2020): the woman in grave no. 186 was adorned with four Sarmatian coin imitations that rested on her forehead as parts of a headgear. The obverses of two were struck in the same die, while a third matched a coin from an unknown findspot, currently in the collection of the Hungarian National Museum.

Other similarities can also be observed between the two graves. Although all four reverses are similar, they were struck with different dies. On the coins from grave no. 186, the stars are small dots above a thin irregular crescent in the middle of the flan, with the legend running all around. On the other hand, the reverses from grave no. 259 show a more ornate floral pattern covering the better part of the field, while the legend is only filling out the space left blank by the crescent.

There are two more coin imitations from a known, closed archaeological context, both from graves. One was unearthed at Pécska (Pecica, Romania), but not much else is to be known about it save for that it was found together with *terra sigillata* sherds (Gohl 1901, 421; Gohl 1904, 80, 84, 13). A deceased woman in a grave in Marten (Bulgaria) wore a necklace consisting of five looped coins: two Sarmatian coin imitations, two other imitations, and a heavily worn *denarius* of Antoninus Pius.<sup>4</sup> In addition to the valuable archaeological context, this grave also shows that the imitations were sometimes combined with genuine Roman pieces without the star-and-crescent reverse.

It is clearly discernible on the pictures of grave no. 259 that the two coins lay with their reverse up (Fig. 2). However, one cannot tell how the pieces were worn on the body or how they were deposited in the grave, since they could have easily flipped during the burial. We can only observe that both coins faced the same direction. This is interesting to note, since the headdress in grave no. 186 was worn with the portraits towards the viewer. But why was the emperor more important than the universal astral reverse, especially on imitations? We can observe similar tendencies among Germanic tribes, where the portrait

played a special role as an expression of prestige, particularly in gold (Bursche 2008, 400). Also, one can not exclude that the stellar motif should be close to the body for the wearer to take advantage of its full protective strength.

We do not have a clear idea of how these star-and-crescent medallions were perceived, but the astral symbols most likely resonated deeply with the Sarmatian beliefs, as indicated by the widespread use of *lunulae* worn by both men and women, and often buried with them (Vaday 1989, 55–57, 61; Istvánovits, Kulcsár 2018, 207–208, 373).

It is interesting that a deceased child and a woman, the most vulnerables of the society, were equipped with such amulets. On the other hand, we also have pierced coins of Hadrian with the star-and-crescent motif from Late Sarmatian graves of men at Rákoscsaba and Üllő (Nagy 2018, 166, Grave 247).<sup>5</sup> Did these coins have a special apotropaic significance, or reflected rather some cosmic beliefs of Sarmatians in general? Were these objects part of their everyday jewellery, or only given to them for the afterlife? The great number of stray finds seems to support the first interpretation.

With respect to Sarmatian coin imitations, Békésszentandrás-Fabó-tanya is an exceptional cemetery, where six specimens were uncovered in two Late Sarmatian graves. The two pieces published here, struck with the same obverse die, were found around a child's neck. Such coins are very rarely recovered from a closed archaeological context but a few were found in graves, some even in Bulgaria. These fortunate finds can bring us closer to understanding the significance and role of these peculiar coin imitations and the role of the imperial portrait and the star-and-crescent motif among Sarmatians.

### Notes

- 1 This research is part of the Ancient Coins East of the Danube project (NKFI PD-132300), supported by the National Research, Development and Innovation Office.
- 2 A possible exception is a Sarmatian coin imitation, found together with 116 Roman coins at Vác-Kláraháza, that was part of a scattered hoard (Juhász 2020). Recently, more pieces were discovered in another scattered hoard at Csólyospálos.
- 3 These were first minted around 127 AD, and symbolised the Golden Age. Later, the number of stars varied, but its symbolic meaning did not change (RIC II.3, p. 39).
- 4 Grave no. 7. Based on the photograph it is not possible to determine whether the third *aes* imitation is of the Sarmatian type with the star and crescent (Varbanov et al. 2019, 126).
- 5 <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=2256615614596388&set=a.2256615514596398> (accessed 25.04.2022).

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## KÉT SZARMATA ÉREMUTÁNZAT EGY BÉKÉSSZENTANDRÁSI SZARMATA SÍRBÓL

## Összefoglalás

Békésszentandrás-Fabó-tanya késő szarmata temetőjében az egyik gyermeket két szarmata éremutánzzal helyezték végső nyugalomra. Külön érdekesség, hogy mindkettőt ugyanazzal az előlapi verőtővel készítették, hátlapjaikat hold és csillag díszíti. E leleteknek csak ritkán ismert a régészeti kontextusa, ami már önmagában is érdekessé teszi az együtttest, ám néhány esetben feljegyezték, hogy

szintén temetkezésekből származnak. Ilyen ismert a bulgáriai Martenből vagy a Fabó-tanya egy másik sírjából, Pécskáról, ahol egy nő fejére négy szarmata érmet helyeztek. Az új leletek megerősítik a korábbi feltételezést, miszerint a szarmaták a lyukasztott vagy fülezett, hold és csillag hátlapos éremutánzatoknak különös jelentést tulajdonítottak, és amulettként viselték azokat.

