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REVERSE MOTIFS WITH MILITARY INSIGNIA OF NICAEA COINAGE FINDS FROM THE TERRITORY OF PRESENT-DAY SERBIA

Abstract

The coins of Bithynia's provincial mint of Nicaea have been found in great numbers on the territory of the Danubian provinces, especially on Moesia Superior, from the 3rd and the 4th decade of the 3rd century. Researching these finds from the territory of present-day Serbia, a large part of which corresponds with the Roman province of Moesia Superior, greatly contributes to gaining knowledge about the methods of monetary circulation between the Asia Minor and Balkan provinces. On the other hand, classification of the reverse types with military insignia, which are a dominant motif in issues of Severus Alexander and Gordian III from Nicaea's mint, will help with the formation of a new iconography typology. This typology is based on the reverse motifs known so far (89) and considering the appearance dynamics of new details, we expect many more varieties to emerge.

Keywords

Present-day Serbia, Upper Moesia, provincial mint of Nicaea, reverse motifs, military insignia

INTRODUCTION

During the early decades of the 3rd century in the Danubian provinces, circumstances were convenient for the wide-spread distribution of Nicaea provincial coinage in the monetary circulation of Upper Moesia. The presence of these coins was especially significant during the third and the fourth decade of the 3rd century, during the reign of Severus Alexander and the beginning of the reign of Gordian III. Establishing a mint in Viminacium and the beginning of monetary circulation of its coinage had the immediate effect of reducing the quantity of Gordian III coins from the Nicaea mint. The analysis of numismatic finds showed that in the period from Philip I to Valerianus I and Gallienus, almost all of the provincial issues belonged to the Viminacium mint. During the reign of Severus Alexander and the highest influx of Nicaea coinage into Upper Moesia, the remaining Bithynian mints (Nicomedia, Juliopolis and Kalchedon) were represented with only a small number of examples.¹

A large number of Nicaea coins from the territory of present-day Serbia have already been published.² The volume of published finds includes several collections: Belgrade City Museum (256),³ *Viminacium* (470),⁴ National Museum in Požarevac (294),⁵ Šabac Museum (44),⁶ Sremska Mitrovica Museum (21),⁷ Veliko Gradište collection (15),⁸ and the Vrnjačka Banja collection (40).⁹ In addition to these, pieces have also been published that accompany archaeological finds from different excavations or represent parts of private collections (75).¹⁰ Together, these give a total of 1,215 published pieces. We know that some Nicaea coins are still unpublished and are held in several museums in Serbia (around 570 pieces), especially from the Viminacium Museum (540 pieces), with some more in neighbouring countries that originate from the territory of Serbia (around 200 pieces). In total, there are approximately 2,515 known published and unpublished Nicaea

¹ Vojvoda, Crnobrnja 2018, p. 133.

² The territory of present-day Serbia comprises the area of the former Roman provinces of Upper Moesia, Lower Pannonia, Dalmatia and Barbaricum (the region between Lower Pannonia and Dacia).

³ Црнобрња 1981, pp. 5-23; Црнобрња 1987a, p. 116; Црнобрња 2013, p. 31; Црнобрња 2011, pp. 309-318; Црнобрња, Васић Деримановић 2017, pp. 33-61.

⁴ Војвода 2013, pp. 155-196; Vojvoda 2017, pp. 131-150; Vojvoda, Mrđić 2015, pp. 12-17; Vojvoda, Mrđić 2017, pp. 15-17; Vojvoda, Golubović, Redžić 2021, pp. 67-70.

⁵ Војвода, Бранковић 2016, pp. 103-142.

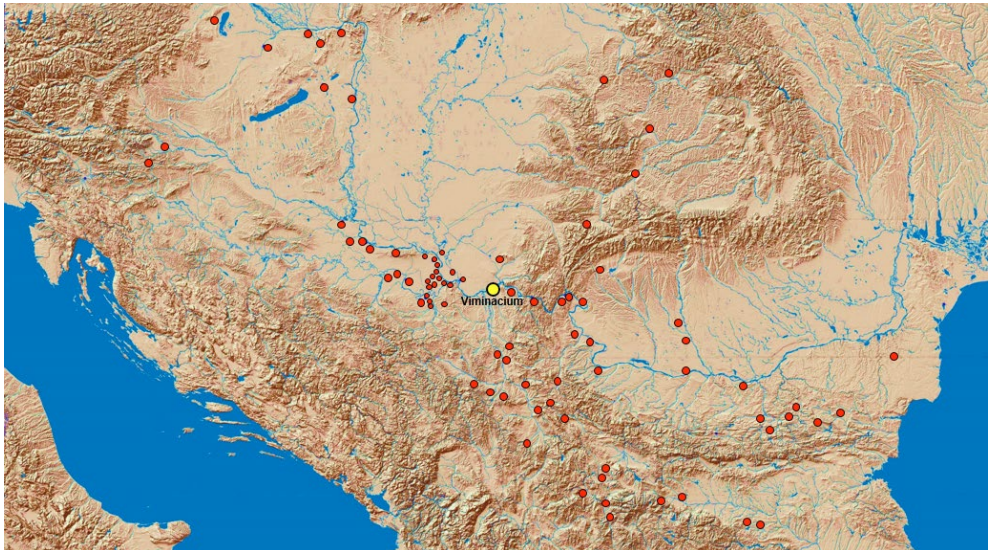
⁶ Војвода, Петровић 2011, pp. 283-307.

⁷ Војвода, Јесретић 2012, pp. 115-132.

⁸ Ivanović 2009, pp. 361-369.

⁹ Сариа 1925, p. 163; Сариа 1926, pp. 199-200; Црнобрња 1987b, pp. 71-72, Cat. 12-13; Borić-Brešković 2011, p. 419, n. 46.

¹⁰ For details on sites where they were found and bibliography, cf. Vojvoda, Crnobrnja 2018, p. 132, n. 8.



MAP 1 - Finds of Nicaea coins from Upper Moesia and from the neighbouring provinces (according to: Vojvoda, Crnobrnja 2017, p. 136).

coins originating from the territory of present-day Serbia. However, it should also be mentioned that there are a number of published coins (98) that came from the territory of the Roman province of Upper Moesia, but outside the borders of present-day Serbia – from Skoplje (*Scupi*) in North Macedonia.¹¹

Finds analysis of Nicaea provincial coinage from the territory of Upper Moesia and their comparison with similar finds from the neighbouring Roman provinces contributes much to the knowledge of methods of circulation between the Asia Minor and Danube provinces, as well as the central and western Balkan provinces. By comparing frequencies of well-known finds of Nicaea coins from the territory of Upper Moesia with the neighbouring provinces, one can notice big differences. This is another parameter that indicates circulation limit of the Nicaea minting, much represented in Upper Moesia, less in Lower Pannonia and even less in Upper Pannonia and further on to the west.

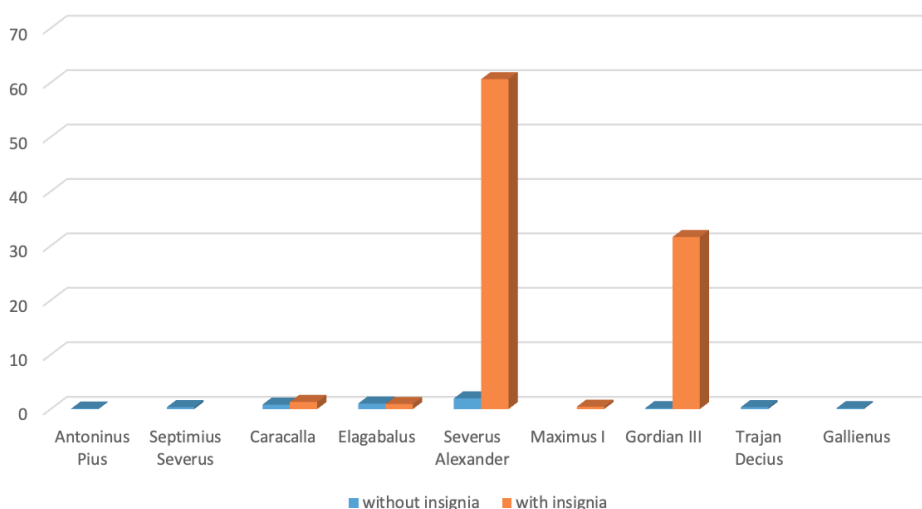
Studies of Nicaea finds from the territory of present-day Serbia show that its greatest concentration was connected to *Viminacium* and its wider surroundings (Map 1). In a broader sense, this circulation was connected mostly to the part of the Danube Limes from *Mursa* to *Viminacium*. The second important direction of spread can be seen along the Morava land road, over *Naissus* and Thrace to The Bosphorus. Finally, large quantities of Nicaea coinage have been noted in the lower Sava valley, from *Sirmium* to *Singidunum*.

¹¹ Šeldarova Vasileva 2022, pp. 305-330. The largest part of the former Upper Moesia is within the borders of present-day Serbia. Only the southernmost part of the Roman province is today in the territory of present-day North Macedonia.

REVERSE TYPES

Of the mentioned 1,215 published pieces of Nicaea coins from the territory of present-day Serbia, only 52 belong to types without military insignia. Various representations appeared on the reverses, such as: Zeus, Demeter, Athena Nikephoros, Asclepius, Hygieia, Nike, Tyche, Kybele, Emperor in military dress, snake emerging from a cista mystica, agnostic urn, hexastyle temple, elephant with rider, etc. Such reverse types are the only ones until the reign of Caracalla, when motifs with military insignia appeared, and among our specimens they are slightly better represented than motifs without insignia (Graph 1). Types with insignia also appear on Elagabalus coinage in approximately the same ratio as motifs without insignia. However, from the reign of Severus Alexander they became an almost exclusive reverse motif. The situation is similar with issues of Gordian III, and after his reign they disappeared again as reverse motifs among published Nicaea coins from the territory of present-day Serbia (Graph 1).

As already mentioned, the most numerous issues of Nicaea coins found on the territory of present-day Serbia date from the reigns of Severus Alexander and Gordian III. During that short period, the mint at Nicaea issued numerous and very diverse types with military insignia. The large sample we have has provided an opportunity to classify them into individual types and variants, especially since reference catalogues to date do not differentiate types within these motifs, except that it are three or four *signa* or *signa* and *aquila*.



GRAPH 1 - Incidence of reverse types among published Nicaea coins from the territory of present-day Serbia.

THE FIRST TYPOLOGY OF REVERSE TYPES WITH MILITARY INSIGNIA

An article by Nikola Crnobrnja, from 1981, proved to be pioneering work on the detailed classification of reverse types with military insignia. From a sample of only 155 pieces from the City Museum of Belgrade, he registered 28 different reverse types.¹² This diversity of types, three decades later, encouraged me and my colleague Adam Crnobrnja to start systematically publishing Nicaean coins from museum collections in Serbia. From 2009 to 2017, we published 1,050 coins with military insignia and approximately as many more still need to be processed and published. During this period, we successively published both small and large collections of Nicaea coins in various articles. At the same time, we were constantly discovering new motifs that had not been noticed in the typology of Nikola Crnobrnja from 1981.¹³

As we continually published coins of Nicaea from different collections, it was considered sufficient to upgrade the typology of Nikola Crnobrnja, and to introduce as few new types as possible, instead defining variants of existing types. Over time, as we introduced five new types and 52 variants of the basic types, we arrived at a total of 89 different motifs (if we count 33 basic types and 52 variants). Often, these motifs differ only in small details, which indicates the great variety of moulds.

However, it became clear that this was not a sustainable approach for several reasons. First of all, there is one omission in the original typology of Nikola Crnobrnja, in the position of type 24. It is a type with three insignia, an *aquila* between two *signa* surmounted by capricorns. This was placed among the types with four insignia, and should be positioned before number 19. A similar problem is encountered with the new types that we have introduced and added to the existing ones. They are marked with numbers from 29 to 33 and are not in the positions they should be, because three of them have three insignia. Additionally, the series of variants that we discovered over time proved to be an added problem. As we discovered them, we assigned them positions within a type, by adding letters in alphabetical order. After a few years it turned out that they are not iconographically in the correct order.

A NEW TYPOLOGY – WORKING DRAFT

In view of the problems we have faced, we decided to first process all the remaining known finds of Nicaea coins in present-day Serbia, and then to analyse all published coins outside of Serbia, and, of course, also the unpublished ones, if we have photos

¹² Црнобрња 1981, p. 6, Plate 2.

¹³ Војвода 2011, pp. 243-256; Војвода, Петровић 2011, pp. 283-307; Војвода, Јесретић 2012, pp. 115-132; Црнобрња 2013, pp. 197-238; Војвода 2013, pp. 155-196; Војвода, Бранковић 2016, pp. 103-142; Црнобрња, Васић Деримановић 2017, pp. 33-61; Vojvoda 2017, pp. 131-150.

of them. Only after that is all complete will we be able to make a completely new typology of reverse motifs with military insignia. The second phase will involve the connection of the motifs with the reverse and obverse moulds.

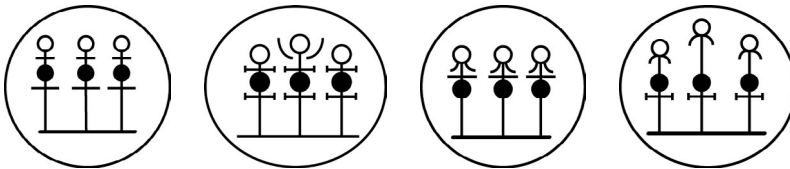
Based on the reverse motifs known so far (89 in total), and considering the appearance dynamics of new details, we expect many more varieties.¹⁴ However, we have a working draft of the future typology of reverse motifs, based on previously known motifs, which we present here. For now, we will call all of them motifs, not types or variants. After a complete analysis, we will decide which of them will be the types and which the variants. The basic division of motifs would be into two groups:

- I – with three insignia (for now we have 64 different motifs) and
- II – with four insignia (for now we have 24 different motifs).

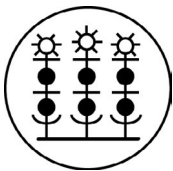
Within each of these groups, the motifs should be sorted according to the number of *phalerae* (from 1 to 4), and then according to other details; the *aquila*, the position of the eagle's head (left or right), etc. Further division within the first group of motifs would be:

I.1 – three standards only with *phalerae* – 37 motifs:

I.1/1 – with two *phalerae* on each standard (4 motifs)¹⁵



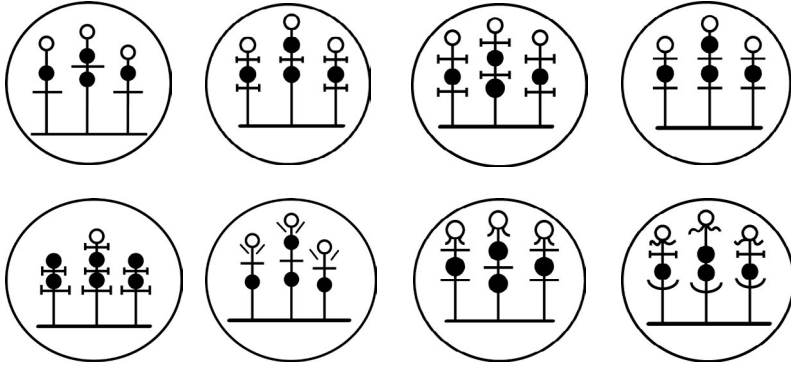
I.1/2 – with two *phalerae* on each standard, surmounted by wreaths (1 motive)



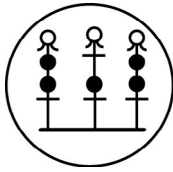
¹⁴ It is amazing how often this happens. For example, last year I processed coins from a small part of the eastern necropolis of Viminacium (from the site of Kod koraba) and among the 10 pieces of Nicaea coins, I found as many as three new variants, cf. Vojvoda, Golubović, Redžić 2021, pp. 53-82.

¹⁵ Within each subgroup of groups I and II, further classification according to details will be done during the finalisation of the typology, in such a way that it is flexible and that new variants can be added to it, without disturbing its structure. Sometimes it is unclear whether the top of the insignia is a wreath or a *phalera*.

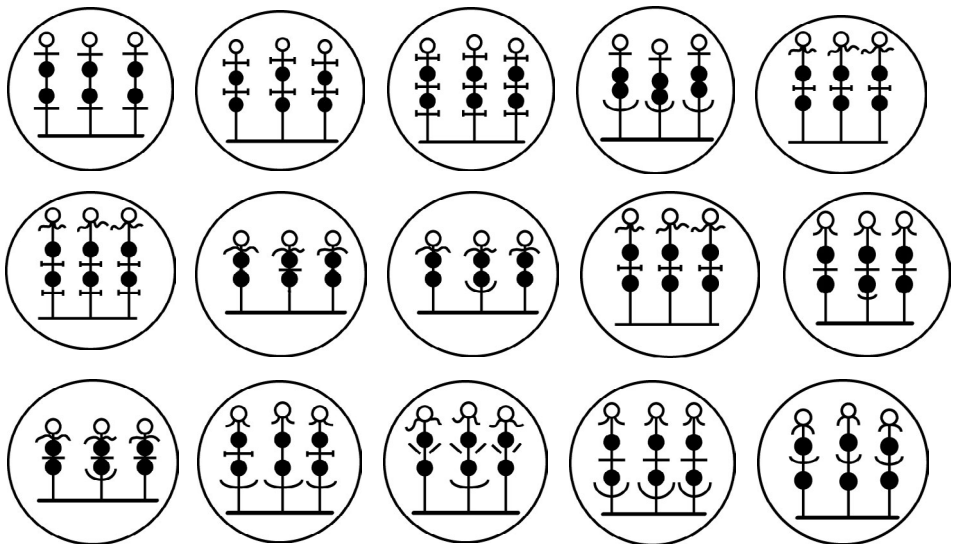
I.1/3 – with three *phalerae* on the middle standard and with two *phalerae* on the lateral standards (8 motifs)



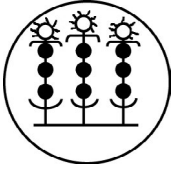
I.1/4 – with two *phalerae* on the middle standard and with three *phalerae* on the lateral standards (1 motive)



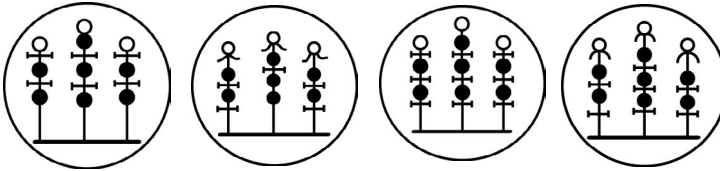
I.1/5 – with three *phalerae* on each standard (15 motifs)



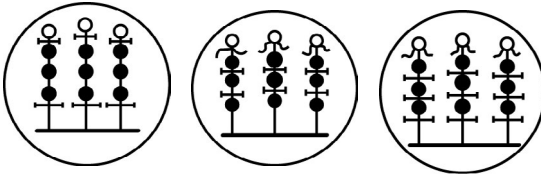
I.1/6 – with three *phalerae* on each standard, surmounted by wreaths (1 motive)



I.1/7 – with four *phalerae* on the middle standard and with three *phalerae* on the lateral standards (4 motifs)

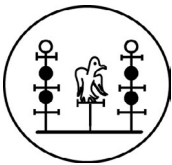


I.1/8 – with four *phalerae* on each standard (3 motifs)

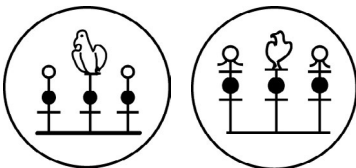


I.2 – *aquila* between two standards only with *phalerae* – 16 motifs:

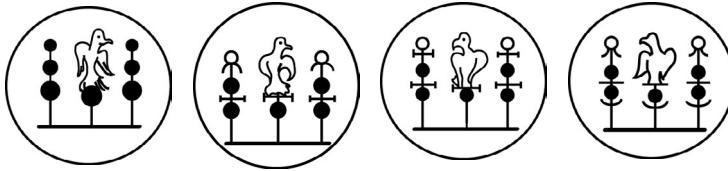
I.2/1 – *aquila* (no *phalerae*) between two standards with three *phalerae* on each; eagle head right (1 motive)



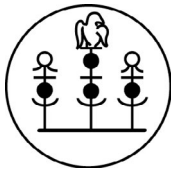
I.2/2 – *aquila* (one *phalera*) between two standards with two *phalerae* on each; eagle head left (2 motifs)



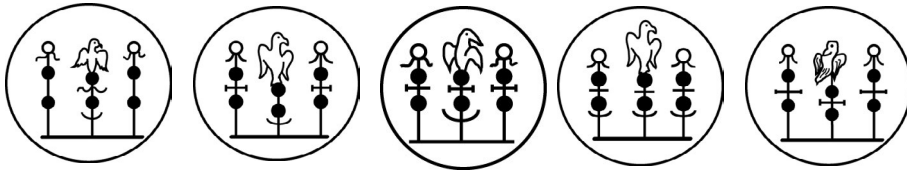
I.2/3 – *aquila* (one *phalera*) between two standards with three *phalerae* on each; eagle head right (2 motifs); eagle head left (2 motifs)



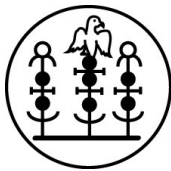
I.2/4 – *aquila* (two *phalerae*) between two standards with two *phalerae* on each; eagle head right (1 motive)



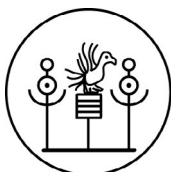
I.2/5 – *aquila* (two *phalerae*) between two standards with three *phalerae* on each; eagle head right (4 motifs); eagle head left (1 motive)



I.2/6 – *aquila* (three *phalerae*) between two standards with three *phalerae* on each; eagle head right (1 motive)



I.2/7 – *aquila* (eagle standing, turned right on undefined object) between two standards with two *phalerae* on each (1motive)



I.2/8 – *aquila* (eagle head facing right standing front on undefined object) between two standards with three *phalerae* on each (1 motive)

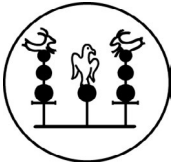


I.3 – *aquila* between two standards surmounted by Capricorns – 6 motifs:

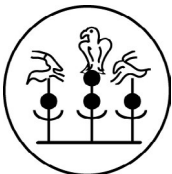
I.3/1 – *aquila* (no *phalerae*) between two standards with three *phalerae* on each surmounted by Capricorns; eagle head right (1 motive)



I.3/2 – *aquila* (one *phalera*) between two standards with three *phalerae* on each surmounted by Capricorns; eagle head right (1 motive)



I.3/3 – *aquila* (two *phalerae*) between two standards with one *phalera* on each surmounted by Capricorns; eagle head left (1 motive)



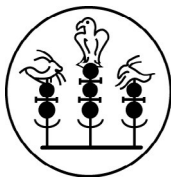
I.3/4 – *aquila* (two *phalerae*) between two standards with two *phalerae* on each surmounted by Capricorns; eagle head left (1 motive)



I.3/5 – *aquila* (two *phalerae*) between two standards with three *phalerae* on each surmounted by Capricorns; eagle head right (1 motive)

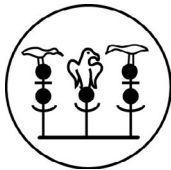


I.3/6 – *aquila* (three *phalerae*) between two standards with three *phalerae* on each surmounted by Capricorns; eagle head left (1 motive)



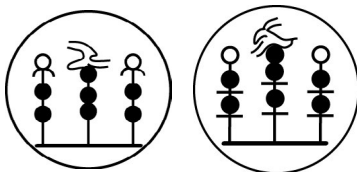
I.4 – *aquila* between two standards surmounted by birds – 1 motive:

I.4/1 – *aquila* (one *phalera*) between two standards with two *phalerae* on each surmounted by birds; eagle head right (1 motive)



I.5 – standard surmounted by Capricorn between two standards with *phalerae* – 2 motifs:

I.5/1 – three standards with three *phalerae* on each, middle one surmounted by Capricorn; Capricorn to right (1 motive); Capricorn to left (1 motive)

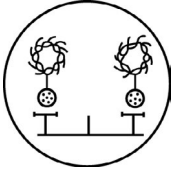


I.6 – standard with *phalerae* between two standards surmounted by Capricorns – 1 motive:

I.6/1 – middle standard with four *phalerae*, the lateral standards with three *phalerae* and surmounted by Capricorns (1 motive)



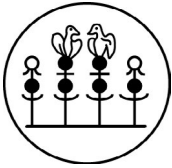
I.7 – unknown standard appearance between two standards with one *phalera* each and surmounted by wreaths – 1 motive:



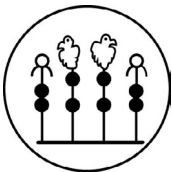
According to the same principle, we propose the classification of motifs with four insignia (group II):

II.1 – two *aquilae* on the middle standards and lateral standards with *phalerae* – 7 motifs:

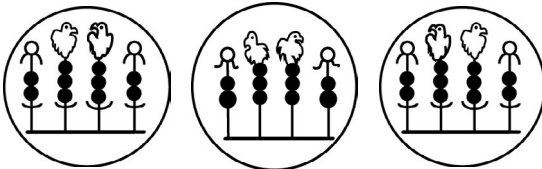
II.1/1 – two *aquilae* on the middle standards with two *phalerae* and lateral standards with two *phalerae*; eagles' heads facing centre (1 motive)



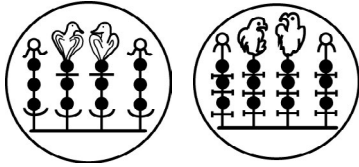
II.1/2 – two *aquilae* on the middle standards with two *phalerae* and lateral standards with three *phalerae*; eagles' heads facing outwards (1 motive)



II.1/3 – two *aquilae* on the middle standards with three *phalerae* and lateral standards with three *phalerae*; eagles' heads facing centre (1 motive); eagles' heads facing outwards (2 motifs)

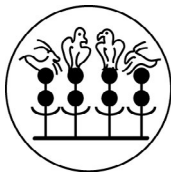


II.1/4 – two *aquilae* on the middle standards with three *phalerae* and lateral standards with four *phalerae*; eagles' heads facing centre (2 motifs)

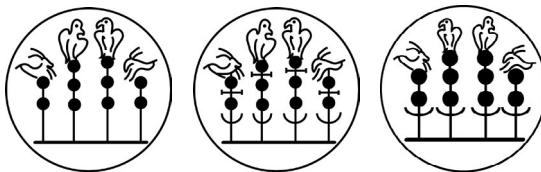


II.2 – two *aquilae* in the middle standards and lateral standards surmounted by Capricorns – 6 motifs:

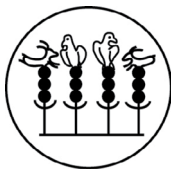
II.2/1 – two *aquilae* on the middle standards with two *phalerae* and lateral standards with two *phalerae* surmounted by Capricorns; eagles' heads facing centre (1 motive)



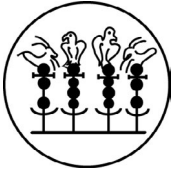
II.2/2 – two *aquilae* on the middle standards with three *phalerae* and lateral standards with two *phalerae*; eagles' heads facing centre (2 motifs); eagles' heads facing outwards (1 motive)



II.2/3 – two *aquilae* on the middle standards with three *phalerae* and lateral standards with three *phalerae*; eagles' heads facing outwards (1 motifs)

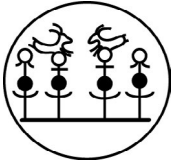


II.2/4 – two *aquilae* on the middle standards with four *phalerae* and lateral standards with three *phalerae*; eagles' heads facing outwards (1 motifs)

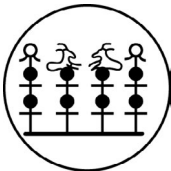


II.3 – standards in the middle surmounted by Capricorns and lateral standards with *phalerae* – 10 motifs:

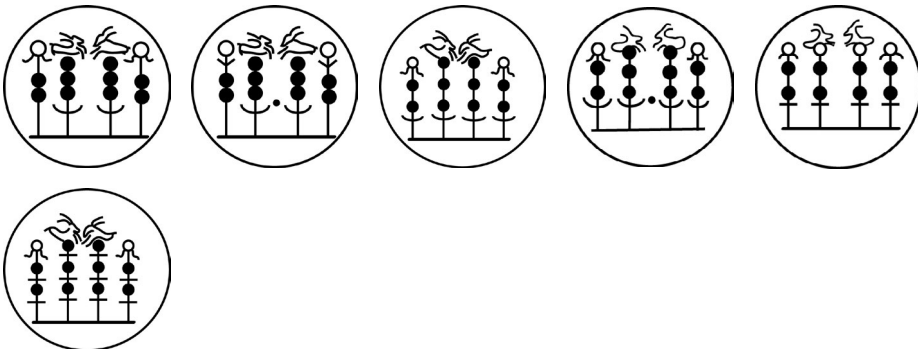
II.3/1 – standards in the middle with two *phalerae* surmounted by Capricorns and lateral standards with two *phalerae* (1 motive)



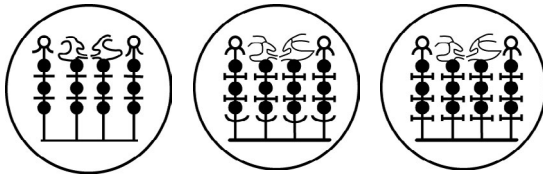
II.3/2 – standards in the middle with two *phalerae* surmounted by Capricorns and lateral standards with three *phalerae* (1 motive)



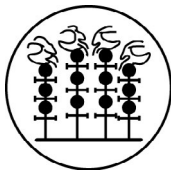
II.3/3 – standards in the middle with three *phalerae* surmounted by Capricorns and lateral standards with three *phalerae* (6 motifs)



II.3/4 – standards in the middle with three *phalerae* surmounted by Capricorns and lateral standards with four *phalerae* (3 motifs)



II.4 – four standards surmounted by Capricorns – 1 motive:

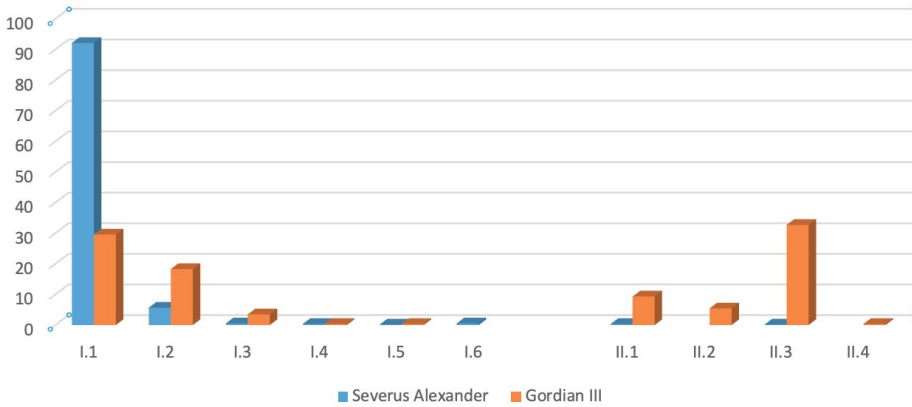


CONCLUSION

We will decide on the order of details on the motifs within these groups only after processing the remaining unpublished pieces from Serbia and published ones from other countries. Here we have presented a working draft of a new typology of reverse motifs with military insignia, which will change with the appearance of new varieties. So far, we have registered 89 different motifs based on only 1,163 published coins from the territory of present-day Serbia.¹⁶ This fact indicates the necessity of further research of this phenomenon.

What else we can point out, based on the coins processed so far, is the representation of certain motifs in the most numerous issues of Severus Alexander and Gordian III (Graph 2). The motifs from group I (with three insignia) are almost exclusively represented in the issues of Severus Alexander, with 99.45% and 49 motifs, while motifs from group II (with four insignia) occur in only 0.55%, or two motifs. When it comes to the minting of Gordian III, the situation is completely different. With 52% of the samples, motifs with three insignia are present, in 34 different motifs, while the motifs of group II (with four insignia) are represented by 48% in 24 motifs. It is clear from this that almost all known motifs with four insignia come from the issues of Gordian III.

¹⁶ Of the 1,215 published coins, 52 of are without military insignia on the reverse.



GRAPH 2 - Incidence of motifs (group I and II) in the issues of Severus Alexander and Gordian III.

Regarding the operation of the Nicaea mint, many questions remain open, from those related to its circulation and the reasons why it appears in large quantities in a certain period especially in the part of the Danube Limes to those questions that are related to the iconography of motifs with military insignia and attempts to identify some of the symbols with specific legions, connecting the obverse and reverse moulds, etc. The great variety of reverse motifs with military insignia of the Nicaea mint is a topic that has not overly interested experts until now. We hope that the implementation of our project will, in the coming years, result in the creation of a final typology of these reverse motifs, but also in the determination of issues and officinae of the Nicaea mint, primarily from the reign of Alexander Severus and Gordian III.

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