

## NUMISMATICS

*By Jaho Brahaj*

Albanian numismatics began in the last decades of the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C., when in Apollonia and Durrës, the first coins were produced, which displayed the name of these Illyrian cities.

The geographical position favored the Illyrians regarding economical and cultural development in Mediterranean civilization. The development of slavery relations and of the trade and artisan centers of Illyria resulted in the necessity to exchange coins, which were used in the Mediterranean in the 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Southern Illyria reached a high degree of development in the 4<sup>th</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> centuries B.C, the time when powerful Illyrian states were founded and new Illyrian cities were established.

It is interesting to notice, that in the Illyrian territory, bronze axes were discovered, pre-dating the coin production (12<sup>th</sup>- 10<sup>th</sup> century B.C.), which were used as bronze masses of a guaranteed value in the market.



Axes used only for exchanging goods



Coin of Pyrrhus of Epirus, 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C.

Coin from Lezha (Lysis), 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C.

The ancient cities of Durres (Durrahu) and Apollonia influenced the other centers of Illyria to produce their own coins. To number are the following centres: Molos State, Epirote League, Moloseve Tribe, Amanteve Tribe with their center city Amantia (Ploça e Vlorës), Lisitan Tribe with their center in Lezha (Lisi), Labian Tribe (that lived in the highlands of Shkodra and Puka, including Montenegro), the cities of Shkodra, Finiqi (Phoenician), Orikum (Oriku), Butrint, Mavrova (Olympas) of Vlora, Hekali (Byllis) of Mallakstra and so on.

If we add to these centers the coins featuring written names of the kings like: Monun, Mytil and Gent, the coins produced in Damastion (Janjevë) from the Dardans and those of many other northern coastal Illyrian centers close to the Adriatic sea, then we notice that



Coin of Monun King, 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C.

the producing workshops in Illyria had a wide expansion in the country. This indicates an economical, cultural and political development of Southern Illyria as well.



Treasure of ancient coins discovered in Albania

Following the example of the Mediterraneans, the ancient coins of the many Illyrian centers made use of writings in the Greek (Hellenic) Language which was the fashion and style of the time.

Their coins and emblems, aside from being indicators of economical development, have value as importance heritage and the level of artistic expression.

Most of coins are magnificent artworks, with carved shapes from the best masters of the time and are of interest to antique arts researchers. An important and irreplaceable object, not very well studied, is the Illyrian pantheon, autochthone and typical Illyrian, inherited for thousands of years that is widely displayed with ethnic individuality in the Illyrian coin emblems.

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Coin of King Gent, 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.

Coin from Shkodra, 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.

The emblem symbols of the Illyrian coins are special, because there are not only the displays of the kings' portraits, but also mythological figures and sometimes the products equal to the exchange value of the coin. There is also a unique case with the Epiriot coins, where is displayed the portrait of the King Pirro, and this coin was produced not in Illyria but during the military expedition in Italy.



Coin from Movrova (Olympe), 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C.

Most of the Illyrian coins have the portrait of the pre-Illyrian (pellazge) myths, gods and goddesses on both sides. These treasures are sources for knowing the pagan religious cult of the Illyrian people, Southern Illyria and Epirus. Typical mythological figures in Illyrian coins are as follows: Amantatia, has the head of Zeus and

the lighting or the oak crown. Byllis has an eagle, the lighting and the fire of Nymphean; Lisi (Lezha) has the bust of the Illyrian god Redon and on the back the lightning, and others feature the goat and the lightning; Shkodra has the head of Zeus. The bust of Zeus is found also on other coins in Amantia and Durrës among others, testifying that this god was adored in all Illyrian territory, as a local and inherited god. We know that saint attributions that personified the god Zeus, were the oak, the eagle and the goat, and lightning was the fighting gun of Zeus. A coin produced in Lezha, shows graphically an unknown god of the Illyrian pantheon, with Redon, the god of waters and sea. The name of this Illyrian god is preserved in the name of a geographical location, the Cape of Redon.



Coin from Damastion city of Dardania

The display of a helmet that is of different shape compared to the neighboring countries, that is found in many samples in archaeological excavations, is a convincing and solid argument that defines the "Illyrian helmet", and not as a Greek-Illyrian helmet.

The Illyrian coins of Shkodra, Lisitanëve (Lezha), Labianëve and Daors, have chosen the ship as their emblem on the coins, that had an important economical and military impact in the life of the people. It also show us the shape and the construction of the typical Illyrian ships which are known in history as the *Liburn Ship*. It is important to note that the masters who engraved the emblems of these coins, even though working on a small surface of few millimeters, have achieved to design artistically the main features of the ship.



Venetian coin of "Dalm et Alban"

After the occupation of Illyria from the Roman Empire, the local coin workshops continued to function, but the production was controlled and used for the economical needs of the Empire, however in some coins the name of the city was written.

Medieval Venedik (Venice) produced a new coin for the Balkan territories, where it was written "Dalmat et Alban".



Paper money of Korca Republic

The second important stage for the Albanian numismatics is the Medieval period, when Albania applied the feudal economical system and there was an increase in numbers of the Albanian princes and nobles. The economical income and independence of the princes brought the production of the coins from the Princes of Balshaj and Gropa, which had its center in Oher (Ohrid).

The economical development of the medieval cities with good markets and community governing status produced the local city coins



5 Francs, 1927



WWII coin



WWII coin



1930 coin

20<sup>th</sup> century  
Albanian coins

of Shkodra, Ulqin, Drisht (Drivast) and Shas (Svaç). One document tells about the use of the tools and the masters' production of the coins also in Kruja during Skanderbeg's State, but there is not yet a sample and it is not known if this coin was ever produced in Kruja in the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

The modern Albanian state of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had its own coins and paper money. Production in the 20<sup>th</sup> century began with the paper money of the Regional Municipality of Korça in 1917, and other paper money was produced in city municipalities in the coming years.

The first Albanian coins were produced in 1926, and the unit was called "Lek", in honor of Alexander the Great, and like in the paper money of that period displayed emblems featuring subjects from the cultural tradition of the people. In the following years, the portrait of the Albanian Monarch dominates the coinage. From the Albanian Monarchy, commemorative coins of special value for the collectors of Albanian numismatics, were produced such as "5 Fr. Ar" (i.e. 5 Fr. Gold) and the productions 1 and 2 Fr. Ar., for the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of declaration of Albanian Independence (1937).

During World War II, the coins and paper money of the Albanian Bank had ideological symbols of the Fascist occupation, and were used during this period in the Albanian territories of Kosovo, Macedonia and Montenegro.

After 1944, a new stage began for the coins and the paper money of the Albanian State. The paper money had several productions, starting with the unit "Frang" and from the year 1947 was referred to as "Lek", which is the same unit in use today.

Collectors of Albanian numismatics have been documented since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, including the family of Dukagjin that immigrated to Dubrovnik and Venice. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in the 20<sup>th</sup> century there are some well known collectors of Illyrian numismatics, such as Lef Nosi (Elbasan), Eqrem Vlorë (Vlorë), Shtjefën Gjeçovi (Janjevë-Kosovo), Kol Gjini (Shkodra) and the rich collections of the Jewish and Franciscan Museum in Shkodra. There was a great deal of damages to the Albanian numismatic collections during World War II. In 1947, with the estab-

lishment of the Ethnographic- Archaeological Museum in Tirana, from the archives of archaeological discoveries and returning of objects from private and museum collections, the Numismatic Cabinet was opened and at the present is operated by Centre of Albanological Studies. At the present, there are affirmed numismatic collectors in Albania and they also have unique samples of Illyrian coins.

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