

THE LATE ROMAN – EARLY BYZANTINE COIN FIND OF FIRTUȘU (FIRTOSVÁRALJA) IN LIGHT OF RECENTLY DISCOVERED ARCHIVAL DATA, Part 1*

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The largest coin find in Transylvania known today from the Early Middle Ages was discovered in 1831 in Firtușu (Firtosvâralja), on Mount Firtuș (Firtos) rising above the village. The Late Roman – Early Byzantine gold coins have occupied scholars since then as to where this enormous treasure came from, who may have hid it away and what the reason was to do so atop Mount Firtuș. Seven of the coins that have survived to the present are at the Haáz Rezső Museum in Odorheiu Secuiesc (Székelyudvarhely) and four are in the coin collection of the Transylvanian National Museum of History. Many people have dealt scientifically with the composition and historical interpretation of the coin find. On the basis of archival research, the author of the present article has succeeded in increasing the number of coins that have descriptions and can be determined as being from the Firtuș find from the previous 19 to 54, while through the questioning of the origins of a few coins believed to have been from Firtuș has also narrowed the ages of the earliest and most recent examples in the treasure. According to this, the most recent coins are from the time of the emperor Justinian I (527-565), and due to this, the act of hiding them would indicate the fleeing of the Gepids from the Avars in the years after 567.

INTRODUCTION

A treasure trove made up of ancient gold coins found by chance on Mount Firtuș (Firtos) that rises above Firtușu (Firtosvâralja) in Székely Land in Romania has occupied innumerable people in the nearly two centuries that have passed since its discovery. The list of these people naturally opens with those who were directly affected: the lucky discoverers, the buyers of the gold coins that were found and their resellers. After them follow the reporters of the treasure's discovery and then the official persons who examined the truth of the reports and stepped forward using the law to obtain the gold coins that were found. Later the collectors arrived on the scene, and managed through various means to get their hands on the Firtuș gold coins that had by then become renowned throughout Transylvania. From the 1840s the Hungarian, Székely and Saxon intellectuals showing up in the vicinity of Mount Firtuș that were interested in the history and relics of the area as well as foreign travelers turned their attention to the treasure trove. Since this time and up to the present day, the coin find of Firtușu still crops up in historical and archaeological works discussing the period.¹

The storybook discovery of the gold coins and then the gold rush that broke out in the wake of this was recorded in numerous official documents, and these archival sources can also be used as a kind of goldmine for history on the period. They often contain more information about 19th century conditions than the topic of the research, the Late Roman – Early Byzantine period. This kind of historical investigation is not without precedent in Hungarian archaeology, it is enough to think about the treasure hunting stories of Ferenc Móra (MÓRA 1979). István Bóna also turned to archival resources when examining several finds from antiquity or the migration period (BÓNA 1986; 1983), and more recently Péter Prohászka published an entire book's worth of narrative histories (PROHÁSZKA 2005; 2008). The first part of the present article is similarly built upon the data from official records, documents and rulings that have fortunately been preserved in archives, while the second part presents the composition of the coin find and the historical situation that existed in the vicinity of Mount Firtuș at the time when the gold coins were hidden.

* The second part of the article will be published in the autumn issue of Hungarian Archaeology (*the editors*).

¹ For the research history of the coin find, see: SOMOGYI 2015: 58–76.

THE NEWS OF THE GOLD COINS SPREADS

In July of 1831, despite the threat of a cholera epidemic, they held the St. Margaret's day national fair in Mediaș (Medgyes). Many came even from far away to the small Saxon town on the Târnava Mare (Nagy-Küküllő) River to buy and sell, exchange ideas and spread news. While at a national fair such as this that lasted several days there was a wide range of merchandise changing hands, perhaps even the most experienced fair-goers may have been amazed that an old Székely man was offering strange gold coins for sale. István Györffy from Firtușu attempted to do this for a long time, but in vain. The people were clearly suspicious when seeing the entirely unknown and strange-looking coins, and nobody was willing to pay the price he was asking. In the end buyers did appear after all, a Jewish man whom István Györffy did not know bought three coins for 45 silver shillings, while János Márton from Papiu Ilarian (Mezőbodon) also bought three, but now for 46 silver shillings. Since István Györffy was not the only one from the area who was offering these kinds of coins, the news soon spread that not long ago ancient gold coins had been found on the outskirts of Firtușu, and now the several lucky people who had found them were trying to sell them for money as soon as possible in the crowds at Mediaș. So, if for some reason anyone was looking for these kinds of goods, they would be able to buy a few at a bargain price. Obviously neither the Székelys from Firtușu, nor the people buying the gold coins knew – or if they did, they did not care – that the purchase and sale of ancient treasures found in the ground was illegal.

After all, at this time treasures found in the territory of the Habsburg Empire, so in Transylvania as well, were regulated in such a way that one third of the value went to the finder, one third to the landowner and one third to the state treasury. The Imperial Antiquities Collection in Vienna had the right of first refusal for purchasing antiquities found in the ground. Assuring the financial interests of the state treasury and the land owners as well as the archaeological interests of the Antiquities Collection was the duty of the local authorities. They were to clarify the circumstances under which the reported treasure troves were found and record this as well as impound and inventory them. After this, the impounded objects along with the associated documents would land up in the Antiquities Collection through the mediation of the Aulic Chancellery. There, the pieces that were worthy of being included in the collections were bought for the value of their metal, while the uninteresting objects were sent back to the agencies with local jurisdiction. Although anyone could purchase silver and gold objects that were sent back for the value of the metal, the common practice was that the closest coin mint obtained them as precious metal to be melted down. After every object found a buyer, the payments of the thirds owed to the finders, the land owners and the state could take place. If it were proven that the discovery had been covered up, then the third that would have gone to the finder also went to the state treasury, and great emphasis was always placed on the examinations that took place to clarify the matters of treasure troves.²

A gentleman named Sándor Kissárosi Szentkirályi would also have purchased some of the ancient gold coins offered in the crowds of Mediaș. However, Ferenc Márton, the Székely man from Firtușu whom he approached was not able to provide a single coin, just a promise that he would bring some for him at the next fair. Márton's promise remained just a promise in the end, to which Szentkirályi took such umbrage that he made a report to the proper authorities about the gold coins found in Firtușu and the purchase and sale of them at Mediaș. For that matter, there were several other people who also made reports. First amongst them was a retired lieutenant, László Gerendi, who had already informed the Royal Treasury responsible for financial matters in the Grand Principality of Transylvania, the Thesaurarius in Sibiu (Nagyszeben), that people had found a great deal of gold coins in the village of Firtușu that belonged under the Székely seat of Odorheiu Secuiesc (Székelyudvarhely) (*fig. 1*). Already on July 14th, so still during the Mediaș fair, the Thesaurarius directed the Royal Office of Public Administration in Târgu Mureș (Márosvásárhely) (offi-

² Cf. Library of the Romanian Academy of Sciences in Cluj-Napoca, estate of István Nagyajtai Kovács, Székelyek, avarok, gepidák, hunok, rómaiak története a székelyekre vonatkozóan (The History of the Székelys, Avars, Gepids, Huns and Romans in Relation to the Székelys). UnitKtár MsU 1179, vol. 12, 19r; PROHÁSZKA 2002: 54, 63. j. It sometimes happened that the state renounced the third that would have gone to the treasury to the benefit of the finder. (BERNHARD-WALCHER 1999: 21).



Figure 1: Firtușu and its vicinity on section 160 of the first military survey (1769–1773)

cial Latin name: *Fiscalis Directoratus*) to send out officials to investigate the truth of the report and to send an investigation report along with the confiscated treasure as well as the statement related to the amount to be issued proportionally to the finder and the owner of the site. Since in the subsequent days several reports similar to László Gerendi's followed, such as Sándor Szentkirályi's, one week later on the 21st of July the *Thesaurarius* again ordered the *Fiscalis Directoratus* to examine the matter.³

THE OFFICIAL INQUEST AND THE FOLLOWING TRIALS

The cogs in the otherwise cumbersome and sluggish machinery of Transylvanian public administration were put into motion surprisingly quickly in this case. Not only the *Thesaurarius* but also the *Fiscalis Directoratus* proved to be lively, and upon its orders two officials of the *Tabula Regia* arrived in Firtușu on the 18th of August, so in the fifth week after the first report, and began the investigation into the treasure trove (fig. 2).

The two officials, József Bogya and László Faragó saw to their work methodically. First they sought out witnesses in Firtușu, as well as in the neighboring villages of Atia (Atyha), Atid (Etéd) and Corund (Korond). From the affidavits, the statements made under oath by the summoned witnesses, it did not only come to light when, where and how the gold coins that comprised the subject of their inquiry had been discovered, but also fifty or sixty individuals were named by the witnesses as the finders or purchasers of the gold coins. Following this, they investigated a portion of these individuals separately, during which the clerks inquired about the actual number of coins found or possessed by the "suspects". If anyone denied

³ Hungarian National Archives, Budapest National Archives, Transylvanian *Thesaurarius*, file no. F 200, 1831.14535, *Investigatio*, 11r-v. From the statement of Ferenc Márton; Hungarian National Archives, Budapest National Archives, Transylvanian *Thesaurarius* file no. F 200, 1832.7267, 3r.



Figure 2: Firtușu and Mount Firtuș rising to the north of the village (photograph: Jenő Deák, source: <http://www.erdelyiturizmus.hu/galeria.php?kepId=12245&idTipus=0&id=3437&fejId=0&galId=0&kepCsop=2>, downloaded 27 July 2018)

involvement or made contradictory statements, then they tried to persuade them to make a confession through cross-examination or confronting them with the witness statements. The on-site investigation was completed on the 25th of August. Arriving back in Târgu Mureș, the officials also interrogated a local grocer on September 5th who had purchased a gold coin from Firtușu.

The completion of the inquiry and the compilation of its results then took significantly more time, because the completed file was only sent by the Fiscalis Directoratus to the Thesaurarius three months later, on the 3rd of December. However, in the file they were not able to include a single coin of the gold that the Royal Treasury so ardently desired. This was because only 14 inhabitants of Firtușu of the individuals questioned as finders or buyers admitted to still possessing some of the gold, for a total of 61 coins. In addition, due to the legal status of the Székelys as nobles it was not possible to confiscate these from them and nobody was willing to part with the beautiful coins voluntarily. Therefore, in its position statement attached to the case the Fiscalis Directoratus recommended to the Thesaurarius that it demand the third of the treasure legally due to the state treasury through legal means, before the regional court for the Székely lands, the *sedria partialis*.

The treasury was forced to follow the legal route in the end, although not voluntarily and not right away. In an ordinance dated the 7th of March 1833, it ordered the district magistrates Lajos Török, Dénes Pálfi, Márton Dullo Szabó and Károly Kováts to their offices at the seat of the Székely lands and to arrest every individual in their district concealing the gold that had been discovered, because a strict order had arrived from above to institute proceedings against them⁴ (fig. 3).

⁴ Romanian National Archives Cluj County Office, Udvarhelyszék Archives, file no. 1833.317.

The orders for the four magistrates are split up amongst the series of files discussing the gold coins from Firtușu in the archives of the Gubernium, the Thesaurariatus and the seat of the Székely lands and have been preserved to this day.⁵ We only have two indirect pieces of information from the 1850s in regard to the trials that were conducted before the *sedria partialis* indicating it was possible for the state treasury to seize a few of the gold coins that had been found. Gergely Sebestyén (1803–1868), a teacher at the Cluj-Napoca legal academy between 1830 and 1849, had not only seen nine of the gold coins from Firtușu, but even recorded them. Sebestyén did not state when and where he did this, but since he had been a judge since 1830 at Odorheiu Secuiesc it is quite possible that he recorded some of the coins that had been impounded there (Szinyei 1909: keyword, Gergely Sebestyén). He even might have been able to purchase some of them, because Count László Lázár (1780–1864), one of the chancellors of the Grand Principality of Transylvania in the 1830s, received several of the gold coins that had been found at Firtușu from Judge Sebestyén. Moreover, László Kővári (1819–1907), the renowned Transylvanian historian, wrote as follows about the trove of coins in his book presenting the antiquities of Transylvania published in 1852, “What could they have collected from the gold that was called worthless, they show that there were coins from nine emperors, with the majority being from the time of Justinian, Theodosius, Pulcheria and Marcian” (KÖVÁRI 1852: 187). The mention of the collected gold also suggests that a portion of the coins had been confiscated through the courts, and as these coins show data related to the ruler who minted them, they were also recorded.

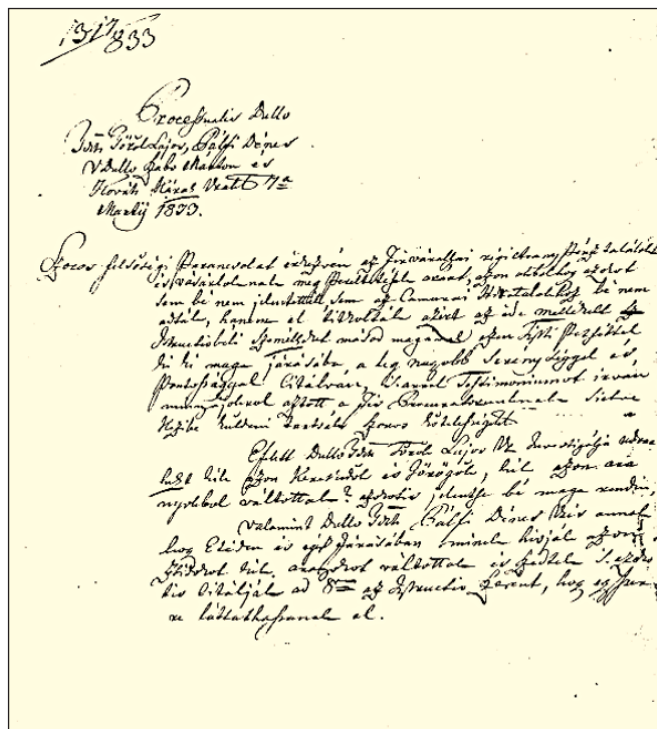


Figure 3: The final document of the series of files generated in the matter of the Firtușu gold coins and preserved to this day, from the 7th of March 1833. Romanian National Archives, Cluj County Office, Udvarhelyszék Archives, file no. 1833.317.

THE DISCOVERY OF THE FIRST GOLD COINS AND THE “GOLD RUSH”

Every one of the witnesses and the finders of the coins who were questioned recounted that the gold coins being inquired about were discovered on the first of July in the cultivated field of the 76 year old István Bálint, which lay on Felső-tető (“Upper Peak”) of Mount Firtuș that rises up above the village. Children watching the cattle grazing on the Firtuș came across the first gold coins on the plowed surface in the middle of a field near a beech-tree stump, as if the rain had washed them out. István Bálint’s 12 year old errand boy, Dani Pál from Páltiniș (Kecset) found three gold coins, and ran home joyfully with them. He showed the coins to his master, who took them from him and immediately began to show them around the village.⁶ Upon the news that the children had found gold coins on the Mount Firtuș many immediately went up the mountain and began to look around in István Bálint’s field. Since gold coins were found one after another at the indicated location even more set off for the mountain after dinner. Following the search for gold that stretched into the night, it was not just the people of Firtușu, but the inhabitants from the surrounding villages that climbed the Firtuș to dig for gold. Many found a gold coin or more, because they were not in

⁵ Hungarian National Archives, National Archives in Budapest, Transylvanian Thesaurariatus, files nos. F 200, 1831.14535 and 1832.7267; Hungarian National Archives, National Archives in Budapest, Transylvanian Gubernium, file no. F 46, 1832.4821.
⁶ Hungarian National Archives, National Archives in Budapest, Transylvanian Thesaurariatus, file no. F 200, 1831.14535, Investigatio, 6r-v. From the statement of Dani Pál.

one spot, but in the middle of the land. They were scattered around the field, turning up here and there amongst the weakened roots of the beech tree that had dried up and died (*fig. 4*).⁷

On the basis of the details of the statements quoted in the inquiry records, there is no doubt that the gold coins had originally been hidden in a shallow pit in one pile. They were scattered amongst the furrows when during the most recent plowing the plowshare had run through their hiding spot, which had previously been protected by the roots. However, the farmer doing the plowing had not noticed any of this. A substantial downpour was also needed for the children watching the cattle to notice the yellow, glittering “pebbles” that had been washed out by the rain while they were rummaging around out of boredom. And since upon this news the villagers instantly ran up the mountain and found plenty more, a gold rush broke out in the area. This is how the gold coins that had once been hidden on the Mount Firtuş landed up in the hands of not one or at most two or three people, but instead many, many people. Of course it is not possible to discover in the end how many people found coins there. The officials were clear on this, because they finished up the list of the fifty or sixty individuals from Firtuşu who were known to have found coins with the note that many from neighboring villages had also found gold, but they had not been able to identify them.

THE GOLD COINS THAT HAD BEEN FOUND TAKE TO THE ROAD

Even if they had not known earlier, everyone affected must have known the provisions of the law regarding treasures discovered in the ground at the latest from the officials performing the inquiry in August. It is possible to imagine their disappointment when they were informed that finders were required to report treasures and submit them to the authorities, and those who do not do so, as was the case with them, would get nothing. Even honest, law-abiding finders would only receive one-third the estimated value of the metal, and only when the official proceedings had been completed. Therefore, it is no surprise that the finders that to their misfortune had become known and had been questioned only admitted to having as little of the gold as possible, and they stated that they had already sold the majority of what they admitted to having had.

The majority of the lucky finders were poor, needy people. They genuinely sold the gold for money quickly, so they could get out from under their debts and back taxes in this unexpected manner. This is how a significant portion of the gold had changed hands by the August inquiry and the coins from Firtuşu had been spread around Transylvania through the people who bought and resold them. Three had landed



Figure 4: Dried out beech tree from the present day on the southern slope of Mount Firtuş. The tree that once stood in the middle of István Bálint's field and concealed the gold amongst its roots may have looked like this (photograph: András Sófalvi)

⁷ Hungarian National Archives, National Archives in Budapest, Transylvanian Thesaurariatus, file no. F 200, 1831.14535, Investigatio, 19r-v. From the statement of János Deák; Hungarian National Archives, National Archives in Budapest, Transylvanian Thesaurariatus, file no. F 200, 1831.14535, Investigatio, 7v. From the statement of József Márton; Hungarian National Archives, National Archives in Budapest, Transylvanian Thesaurariatus, file no. F 200, 1831.14535, Investigatio, 5r-v. From the statement of István Bálint.

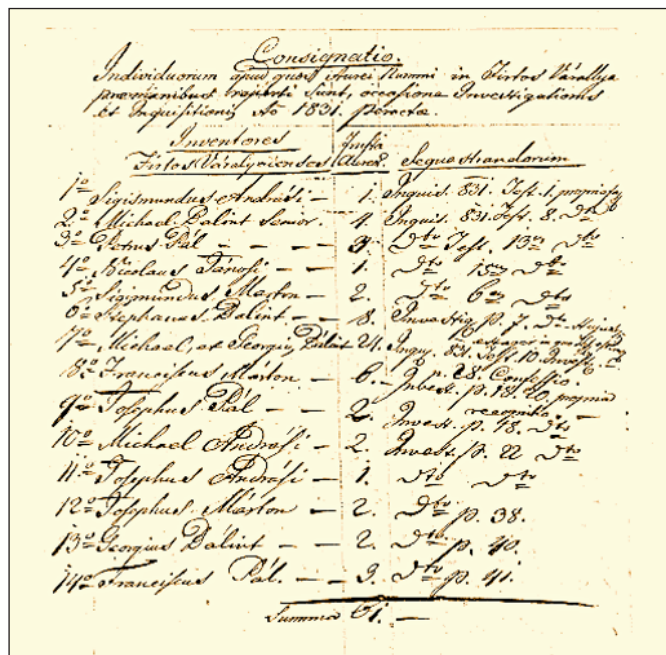


Figure 5: The list of individuals who admitted to possessing the gold coins that had been found. Hungarian National Archives, National Archives in Budapest, Transylvanian Thesaurarius, file no. F 200, 1831.14535, Investigatio, 27r.

up in the Transylvanian Plain region through the aforementioned János Márton, and another in Gheorgheni (Gyergyó) through an unknown gentleman. Zsigmond János, an Armenian merchant from Cristuru Secuiesc (Székelykeresztúr) bought 11 coins, but they also knew of 11 coins in the possession of Pál Kelemen, a rich Székely from Atid. There were buyers from nearby Crișeni (Kőrispatak) as well as Odorheiu Secuiesc further away. Certain individuals such as Mihály Bálint, Ferenc András and Miklós Sófalvi from Firtușu paid off their taxes in Odorheiu Secuiesc with the coins they found, which the tax collector – instead of finding this suspicious – counted them as 15 silver shillings.⁸

Dávid Szenkovits, an Armenian merchant from Atid set up a tent below Mount Firtuș and exchanged fruit brandy, pickaxes, handkerchiefs, pepper and other spices as well as corn and cash for the gold coins, and according to the statements of several witnesses came into the possession of more than one hundred gold coins in this way. However, Szenkovits, who was interrogated by the officials in Atid on

the 23rd of August, only admitted to purchasing ten gold coins, and that was only because he had already sold them to a grocer named Demeter Fogarasi from Târgu Mureș. Demeter Fogarasi was also questioned on the 5th of September, and readily admitted to purchasing the ten gold coins, but immediately added that in the meantime he had also sold them on.⁹ Under these circumstances the officials could not find out the original number of gold coins and size of the treasure found at Firtușu. In the end they compiled a list of 237 gold coins, only 61 of which they found on 14 individuals from Firtușu (fig. 5). But even with the coins that were acknowledged, they could do nothing more than have the village judge prohibit their further sale.¹⁰

The individuals questioned during the inquiry into the matter of the gold coins found at Firtușu and even the officials performing the inquiry only spoke of old gold and beautiful old coins, but did not say a word about the images or inscriptions on them or what kind of coins they were. It can only be speculated why this was so, because these strange objects that had never been seen certainly must have piqued the interest of the people. It is known that the puzzled finders of Firtușu even showed the coins to the priest, who would have been able to easily make out the names of the rulers who had minted them, since they were written in Latin. The officials could also have done this, although the villagers who were trying to conceal the gold were obviously not willing to show them the coins. Even if they did see them, then it was outside the official inquiry, as private individuals, so naturally no report was made. However, it is also conceivable that during the investigation, which had become far more complicated than expected, the officials did not even think about inquiring more deeply into the nature of the coins, or if they did, they did not consider it important to note down. Whatever the reason, in the records on the inquiry sent to the Thesaurarius and in the documents that arose after the matter that can be traced up to the 7th of March 1833 there is only a single indication of what kind of gold coins were found in Firtușu, from the statement of Demeter Fogarasi, who

⁸ Hungarian National Archives, National Archives in Budapest, Transylvanian Thesaurarius, file no. F 200, 1831.14535, Investigatio, 10r, 14v, 16v-17r, 17v and 27v.

⁹ Hungarian National Archives, National Archives in Budapest, Transylvanian Thesaurarius, file no. F 200, 1831.14535, Investigatio, 23v. From the statement of Demeter Fogarasi.

¹⁰ Hungarian National Archives, National Archives in Budapest, Transylvanian Thesaurarius, file no. F 200, 1831.14535, Investigatio, 25r.

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acknowledged that he had purchased “...from the aforementioned Armenian Dávid Szenkovits 10 beautiful old gold coins from the time of Emperor Theodosius...”. But since history records three emperors named Theodosius, Fogarasi’s coins may have been from the time of either Theodosius I (379–395), Theodosius II (408–450), or even Theodosius III (715–717). Unfortunately it is not possible to know anything more about the treasure trove of coins from the contemporary official documents.

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