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NIKONION IN ROMAN TIMES

A FRAGMENT OF HISTORY OF AN ANCIENT CITY ON THE LOWER DNIESTER

ABSTRACT This article presents settlement during the Roman period upon the territory of the Greek city of Nikonion, which developed on the mouth of the Dniester River from the 6th century BC to the middle of the 3rd century BC. The region was brought into the Roman sphere of interest in the 1st century AD. The middle of the 1st century AD was the time of the repeated settlement of the Greek city. The basis for these speculations are materials obtained during archaeological work carried out by the Archaeological Museum of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences in Odessa as well as the Institute of Archaeology of the N. Copernicus University in Toruń and the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology of the Polish Academy of Sciences

Keywords: Northern Black Sea coast, Nikonion, Roman period, settlement

NIKONION W CZASACH RZYMSKICH

FRAGMENT HISTORII ANTYCZNEGO MIASTA NAD DOLNYM DNIESTREM

ABSTRAKT W artykule zaprezentowano osadnictwo z okresu rzymskiego na terenie greckiego miasta Nikonion, rozwijającego się u ujścia Dniestru od VI w. p.n.e. po połowę III w. p.n.e. W strefę zainteresowań Rzymu region ten włączony została w I wieku n.e. Połowa I w. n.e. to czas powtórnego osadnictwa na terenie greckiego miasta. Podstawą rozważań są materiały uzyskane w trakcie prac archeologicznych prowadzonych przez Muzeum Archeologiczne Ukrainińskiej Akademii Nauk w Odessie oraz Instytut Archeologii Uniwersytetu M. Kopernika w Toruniu i Instytut Archeologii i Etnologii Polskiej Akademii Nauk

Słowa kluczowe: północne wybrzeża Morza Czarnego, Nikonion, okres rzymski, osadnictwo

The north-western part of the Black Sea coast became part of the Roman sphere of influence from the first century AD.¹ The middle of the same

century was a period of renewed activity in settlement upon the territory of Greek city Nikonion, which was the most important *polis* in the region from sixth to the fourth century BC.

It is believed that banks of the present day liman (estuary) of the Dniester River follow the same path of the two branches of the delta of Tyras River,² the ancient Dniester, that existed in Antiquity.³ More than 70 settlements related to Greek colonization on the banks of the River Dniester,⁴ have

¹ Present article is based on the results of more than 60 years of archaeological research of Nikonion. The last fourteen years of archaeological exploration of Nikonion was carried out by Ukrainian archaeologists from the Archaeological Museum of the Ukrainian National Academy of Sciences at Odessa, and Polish archaeologists from the N. Copernicus University at Toruń as well as from the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Łódź – Mielczarek 2017b. On the excavations see Sekerskaâ 1989, and the monograph Ohotnikov 1997 on Greek Nikonion, which is still relevant. On the results of the joint archaeological work, see, for example, one of reports: Sekerskaâ, Mil'čarek [Mielczarek] 2000. I would like yet again thank for their very fruitful cooperation Dr. N.M. Sekerskaâ, Dr. S.B. Ohotnikov and Dr. I.V. Bruâko, the director of Nikonion necropolis

excavations, also for his kind courtesy to use two drawings from his works.

² Pliny *NH* 4.82 *clarus amnis Tyra*. Also Mielczarek 2020.

³ Agbunov 1978:18; Bruâko, Karpov 1992: 93; Dzis-Rajko et al. 2012: 12.

⁴ It should be noted that at present a 'new model' for the colonization of the North-Western Black Sea coast has been proposed. See Bujskih 2013 on the problem of Istros and Orgame.



Fig. 1. Photo M. Mielczarek

been identified so far.⁵ Most of them are located on the left bank of the liman. Some of them survived down to the Roman time. A number of them have been explored archaeologically.⁶

Only three cities are indicated in the very scanty ancient literary sources as having been located in the region of Lower Tyras River: Nikonion, Tyras and Ophiussa, all three referred to as *poleis*. Nikonion⁷ is located on the left bank of the liman (Fig. 1), the *polis* of Tyras on the right.

The location of Ophiussa,⁸ mentioned by both Ps.-Scylax⁹ as well as by Strabo,¹⁰ is uncertain. Strabo has indicated that Ophiussa was 'on the left' of Nikonion.¹¹ Pliny's view that Ophiussa was an old name for Tyras is now generally accepted.¹² The problem is that Pliny's sources for his knowledge of the lower Tyras River are not clearly known. Eratosthenes, Artemidoros and Agrippa have been suggested.¹³

⁵ S.B. Ohotnikov, who has published the basic study on the subject (Ohotnikov 1990), suggests that the number of settlements should be assessed to have been around 100.

⁶ For instance, see Dzis-Rajko, Ohotnikov, Redina 2012 on the settlement of the 4th-3rd century BC.

⁷ In the text of the inscription discovered at Tyras in 1987, which has been dated to the first quarter of the 3rd century BC, the name of the city has form τὸ Νικόνειον (Vinogradov 1997; Vinogradov 1999). In the opinion of Ū.G. Vinogradov this is correct name of the city. Strabo has Νικωνία (Strabo *Geogr.* 7.3.16 [C 305-306]). Only two cities are listed in the text of Strabo, Nikonia and Ophiussa (Νικωνία, ἡ δ' ἐν ἀριστερᾷ Ὀφιοῦσσα). The form Νικωνία is used by Ptolemy and Steph. Byz. (s.v. Νικωνία). Ps.-Arrian has τὸ Νικόνειον

⁸ Agbunov 1979: 128-138; Agbunov 1984: 131-132.

⁹ Ps.-Scylax 68 (after Counillon 2004). At present there is no reason to change the corrected reading of the manuscript *Parisinus 443* proposed by K. Müller. GGM I, Paris 1855.

¹⁰ Cf. Roller 2018: 359-360.

¹¹ Strabo, *Geogr.* 7.3.16. It has even been suggested that Ophiussa was located on an island which has ceased to exist as the water level has changed (Mielczarek 2018).

¹² Pliny *NH* 4.82 *clarus amnis Tyra, oppido nomen inponens, ubi antea Ophiussa dicebatur*; cf. Val. Flac. 6.84-85.

¹³ Skrzyszka 1977: 74-89.

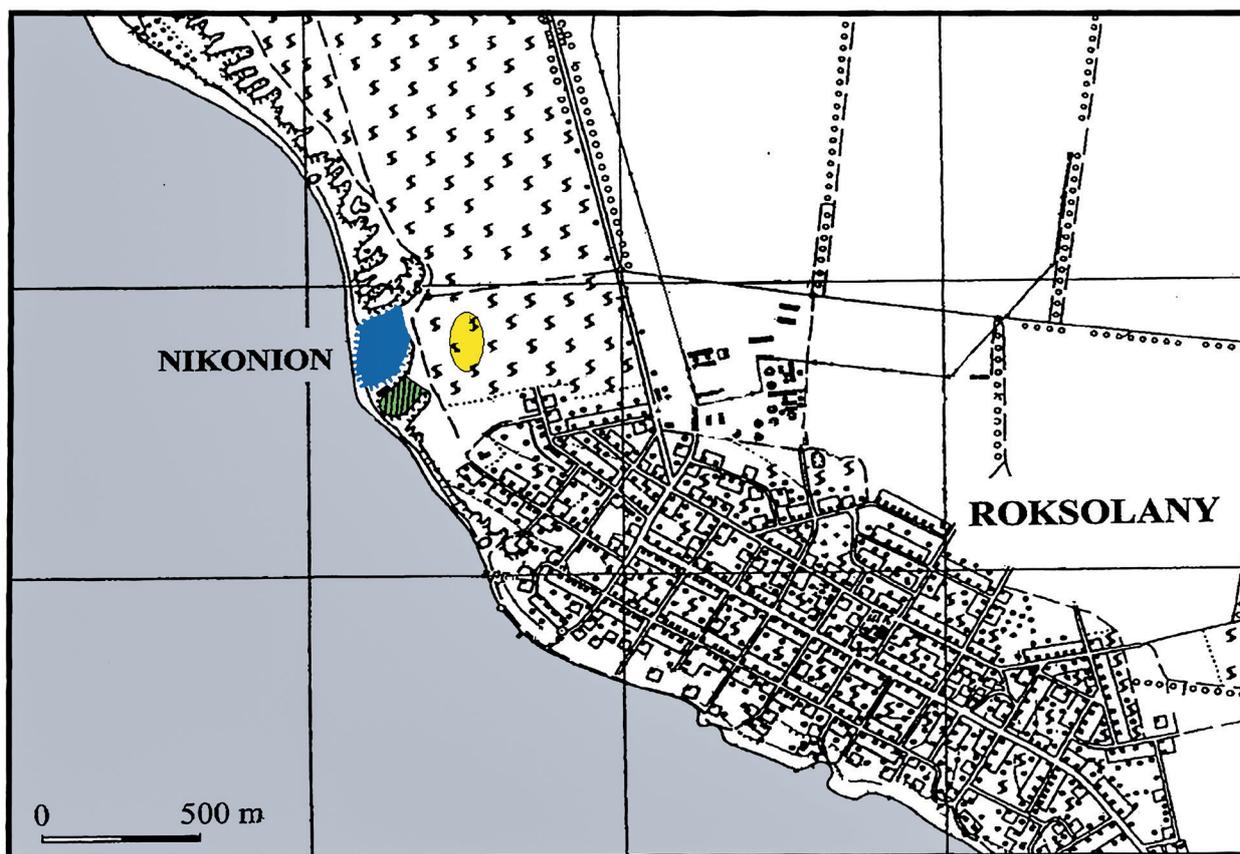


Fig. 2. Drawing E. Wtorkiewicz-Marosik

The mound covering the ancient Nikonion¹⁴ is located to the north-west of the present-day village Roksolany, south-west of Odessa (Fig. 2, blue colour).¹⁵ From the north, east and south the mound is bordered by ravines. One part of the ancient city, the so-called ‘lower city’, was definitively destroyed by the Dniester River in 1904.¹⁶ We have no means of estimating how big the ‘lower city’ of Nikonion was. The suggestion that the lost part of the city destroyed by the river was much larger than the preserved part has won general acceptance.¹⁷ The nature of the finds recovered from the mound covering upper city suggest that the lower city was more probably the administrative and religious centre of the *polis*.

The oldest ceramics found during excavations on Nikonion indicate that the city was founded in the middle of the sixth century BC or earlier.¹⁸ The idea that Miletus was the metropolis of Nikonion has been questioned. Over time it was recognized that coins of Istros, together with local imitations of the cast bronze coins of Istros found on the territory of Nikonion, suggested a special and strong relationship with Istros.¹⁹ The suggestion that Nikonion was an *emporion* of Istros has been proposed.²⁰ The inscription, dating to the third century BC, honouring Authocles discovered in Tyras, gave significant support to the idea that Istros could be the founder of Nikonion.²¹ On the other hand is not clear whether Istros had sufficient potential to found a new city.²²

¹⁴ A publication of key importance for the study of the Roksolankoe gorodišče (Roksolanian mound), the ancient Nikonion, is Karyškovskij 1966.

¹⁵ Proof of the location of the ‘settlement’ proposed by M.S. Sinicyn were, and are still, treated as questionable (Karyškovskij, Kleiman 1985: 15-16).

¹⁶ Goškevič 1912: 176.

¹⁷ Two underwater excavations ended in failure, as the layer of silt in the liman is very thick. Bruão, Dzigovskij, Sekerskaâ 2008: 10-11.

¹⁸ Sekers’ka, Bujs’kih 2018: 37-44; Sekerskaâ, Bujskih 2019: 203-212.

¹⁹ For a discussion of the cast bronze coins with the name of Scyles (omitting Herodotus 4.78-80) see, among others, Vinogradov 1989: 116; Zaginajlo, Karyškovskij 1990: 3-15, Mielczarek 2005.

²⁰ Sinicyn 1966: 55; Musielak 2003: 30.

²¹ Vinogradov 1999.

²² In discussing problems surrounding the origins of Nikonion is interesting to refer to an idea propagated

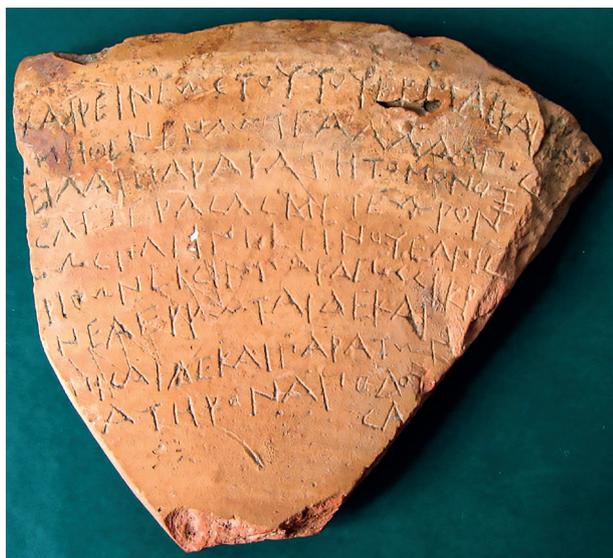


Fig. 3. Courtesy of I. Głuszek

The epigraphic evidence found at Nikonion during the course of archaeological excavations is limited to a fragment (four letters) of an inscription, and graffiti (Fig. 3).²³ Nikonion dominated the region from the sixth to the fourth centuries BC. The opinion that all the settlements located on the left bank of Dniester liman should be regarded as belonging to the *chora* of Nikonion is widely accepted.²⁴

Houses dug into the ground were predominant at Nikonion from the sixth century BC to the first quarter of the fifth century.²⁵ The fifth and fourth centuries BC are a period of prosperity for Nikonion, and the period of the greatest building activity at the city, built mostly of well-finished stones, as revealed in the deep cellars (Fig. 4). Clay bricks were also used. The *necropolis* which served the city of Nikonion during the sixth to the fourth centuries BC has not been identified. Only individual separate graves have been found.

by A.S. Rusâeva. In her opinion the late chronology of the Greek settlement on the Lower Tyras region was connected with wars of Cyrus. Rusâeva 1997: 145. In any discussion of the origins of Nikonion the problem of Orgame should be taken into account.

²³ Awianowicz 2009. From the rich older literature on the subject see Sekerskij 1976; Sekerskaâ, Sekerskij 1997.

²⁴ The opinion that the left branch of Tyras River delta was more navigable than a right branch in those times is widely accepted. It is worth noting that the condition of the soil of the liman are similar on both sides of the Dniester. Is very possible that this opinion holds true also for ancient times (Odrin 2005: 4-5, 14-20).

²⁵ Hdt. 4.78-80. Mielczarek 2016.

In the last quarter of the fourth century BC, the city was burned. This occurrence is usually associated with the expedition of Zopyrion in 331 BC, which reached the city walls of Olbia.²⁶ During the succeeding period Nikonion, as other settlements of the region, experienced an acute crisis. From the end of the third century life in Nikonion practically ceases to exist.

The *polis* of Tyras played the leading role in the region downstream of the Tyras River in the second half of the third century BC.²⁷ The domination of Tyras continued into the Roman period.²⁸ Tyras, when it was incorporated into the Roman empire, was defined in law as a *civitas libera et immunis*. Tyras continued to exist into Late Antiquity and even beyond.²⁹

The Roman period is a time of rebirth at Nikonion, with a new shape to the city and with a new population. Even if the history of ancient Nikonion in Roman times is incomplete (the idea that the former name of the city was still in use is based on textual evidence,³⁰ the rebirth of the city is a very interesting phenomenon. The Nikonion of Roman times is interesting because it can throw light on the position of Tyras in the changes in settlement on the Lower Dniester region, which is an important problem. Our knowledge about Roman Nikonion is based solely on archaeological evidence, and the archaeological materials relevant to Roman times are much poorer than these which can be dated to the Greek period of the city.

The opinion proposed by M.S. Sinit syn, the excavator of Nikonion between 1956 and 1966, that during the first centuries AD settlements spread out to the small plateau lying south of mound covering Greek Nikonion, to the so called Nikonij Mys, was popular for many years (Fig. 2, green).³¹ Currently, as a result of recent archaeological work, it is certain that the Roman remains of Nikonion are only

²⁶ Just. 12.2.16; Macr., Sat. 1.11.33. See Vinogradov 1989: 153-164.

²⁷ For instance Eux. (Ps.-Arr.) 62.

²⁸ See from rich literature on the subject see Sarnowski 1988; Son 1993: 12-20.

²⁹ The city developed in the mediaeval ages as Asprokastron, and as Akkerman in the Ottoman Empire. Belgorod Dnestrovskij, to give the city its modern name, has played an important role in the route 'from the Black Sea to the Baltic' (Mielczarek 2017a).

³⁰ A problem is the identification of the name Nikonion on the 'map' on the shield from Dura Europos (Zahariade 1975; Ohotnikov 1997: 89. Cf. Bruâko, Dzigovskij, Sekerskaâ 2008: 184).

³¹ Bruâko, Dzigovskij, Sekerskaâ 2008: 188.



Fig. 4 . Photo M. Mielczarek

around 80 cm below present surface of the mound covering Greek city. Consequently, the remains of Roman city have been severely damaged, especially as a result of the deep ploughing recently carried out to establish vines.

Remains of houses dating to the Roman period have survived in different parts of the mound, mainly fragments of walls, although no complete house has been discovered.³² The house with two rooms excavated by M.S. Sinitsyn consisted of a wall dividing two rooms which was 7 m long. The width of walls was between 0,4 and 0,5 m. Walls with a width of 0,6 m are rare. In one room a hearth constructed in clay was found. It is possible that the house comprised three rooms.³³ Is possible that the house had an area ca. 105 m².

In the 'central trench'³⁴ of the mound fragments of two walls of a house, dating to the second to fourth centuries AD were discovered.³⁵ Cavities built in clay, with stones in their upper part, were

located in the rooms. In some of them fragments of ceramics, as well as small clay figurines, were found. One room in the house measured ca. 20 m²; but only fragments of two walls have survived. One of them, 4 m long, was built of three courses of unfinished stone surviving up to a height of 60 cm.

Houses were built only to a small extent using stone. Stones from older constructions were also used which were not finished as they were formerly used in Greek cellars (Fig. 4). The remains of buildings are marked by clusters of stones (Fig. 5). In the first centuries AD they are mostly constructions consisting of two or more rooms (Fig. 6). Walls were constructed from clay walls placed on stone foundation. Some of these stones have been reused from older, Greek, constructions.

The typical inventory of the houses is poor,³⁶ but this is important evidence for the problem of the relations, above all economic, that the city enjoyed with the outside world.

It is only natural that ceramics should dominate among finds.³⁷ Amphoras of the second and third

³² Bruâko, Dzigovskij, Sekerskaâ 2008: 17 Fig. 5, 22.

³³ Bruâko, Dzigovskij, Sekerskaâ 2008: 23.

³⁴ Kuz'menko 1976.

³⁵ Kuz'menko 1976; Bruâko, Dzigovskij, Sekerskaâ 2008: 23-25.

³⁶ Morozova 1997.

³⁷ A significant number of the ceramics, above all found in fragments, dating to the Roman period were



Fig. 5. Photo M. Mielczarek



Fig. 6. Photo M. Mielczarek



Fig. 7. Photo M. Mielczarek

centuries AD are heavily represented. Amphoras produced in Panticapaeum and Mirmekion are the most popular. Such amphoras are the most popular in the north Black Sea region in the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD.³⁸ These inventories are very informative about the trading connections of the citizens of Roman Nikonion. The amphorae found at Nikonion are the same type as those discovered in Olbia or the Bosphoran cities Tiritake or Nymphaion.³⁹ The same situation is noted in relation to red-slip ware.

Basing his opinion on the results of the first years of excavation, M.S. Sinitsyn suggested that the city was devoid of defensive walls. Only fragments of a ditch dug into the ground were identified.⁴⁰

Remains of the defensive wall of the city⁴¹ were discovered in the north-eastern part of the

mound in 1961. It was constructed of well finished stones 6,75 m long and 1 m wide, and consisting of three courses of stones preserved up to a height of 0,4 m. However in the opinion of M.S. Sinitsyn this section of wall constructed with well-finished stones did not form part of the defence system of the city. A second fragment was excavated in 1987 and 1990. Fragments of wall were discovered at the northern part of the mound. After these excavations it is certain that Roman Nikonion had a defence wall. Some years later small fragment of the defence wall constructed from stones was discovered. A control excavation (Fig. 7) confirmed that we are dealing with the defensive wall of Roman times. The town was defended by a wall and trench dug in front of it.

Handmade clay ceramics (above all pots) decorated, mostly with fingerprints, are the most popular. The situation is typical for all Late Scythian settlements. Late Scythians settled on the mound after their migration from the Crimea.⁴²

The most important find contributing to our knowledge of the city in Roman times was the discovery in 1991 of a necropolis dating to the first

found in mixed assemblages with materials dated from the 6th century BC to 3rd century AD.

³⁸ Bruâko, Dzigovskij, Sekerskaâ 2008: 29-34.

³⁹ Morozova 1997: 69.

⁴⁰ Sinicyn 1966 (see also Sinicyn 1960); Bruâko, Dzigovskij, Sekerskaâ 2008: 16-22.

⁴¹ According to the first excavator of Nikonion, M.S. Sinitsyn the construction was not to be treated as a defensive wall.

⁴² Bruâko, Dzigovskij, Sekerskaâ 2008: 180.



Fig. 8. Courtesy of I. Bruako

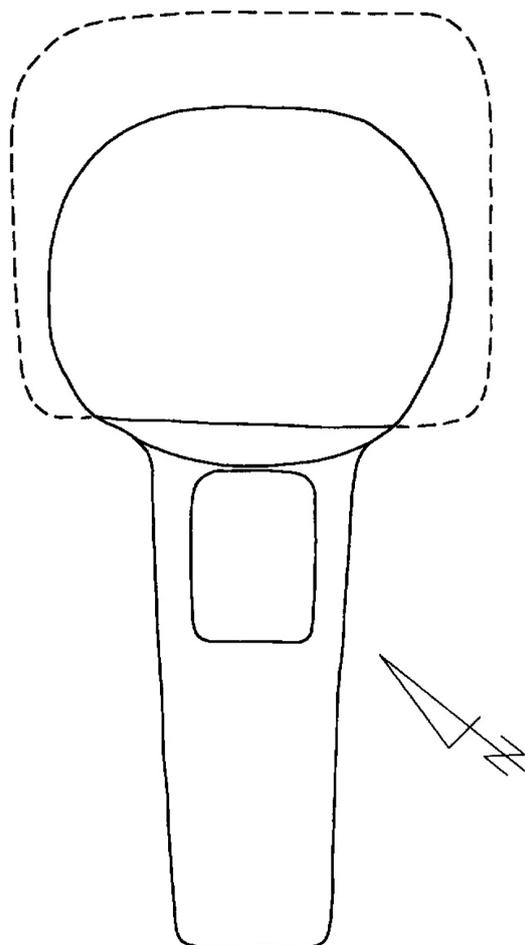


Fig. 9. Courtesy of I. Bruako.
Drawing E. Wtorkiewicz-Marosik

three centuries AD (Fig. 2, yellow). Almost all of the tombs were looted. The excavation of the necropolis has not been completed.⁴³ The Roman necropolis consists of 45 burials. Among the graves belonging to the Roman period were 18 subterranean tombs with collective burials.

Interesting is that on the area of Roman time necropolis were also located early mediaeval tombs (Fig. 8).

The typical type of burial of the Roman period in the necropolis is in a subterranean tomb dug into the clay soil. The construction of the tombs is specific: a long corridor, forming a kind of dromos, with steps leads to the burial chamber (Figs. 9 and 10), 4 to 5 m below present surface. The burial chamber is closed off with a stone slab.

The tomb furniture consists of pottery, including red-slip. Among the latter, specimens from

workshops in Asia Minor dominate.⁴⁴ Handmade clay wares (above all pots), glass bowls, bronze bells are also found. Personal jewellery, including silver fibulae as well as two gems (one object, with a standing figure of Demeter was found in a tomb, the second was found on the surface in the area of necropolis).⁴⁵ It was a popular custom to place coins as a part of the funeral inventory. Among the coins one aureus was discovered. The rich inventory of tombs on the necropolis of Nikonion seems to result from the close connections the site enjoyed with Tyras.

Animal skeletons were also found. Horse skeletons dominate (Fig. 11).

Among the coins dating to the first centuries AD are coins of Tyras, and Roman coins from the Balkan Peninsula, as well as from Asia Minor. Coins of Tyras are most numerous. A hoard of ca. 30 coins of Tyras dating to the end of second and the beginnings of the third centuries was found. More precise data are unknown.

⁴³ The excavations of the necropolis was made under direction of Dr. I.V. Bruâko. See Bruâko, Dzigovskij, Sekerskaâ 2008, 15.

⁴⁴ This opinion is based on Bruyako 1997.

⁴⁵ Bruâko, Ostroverkhov 1997.



Fig. 10. Photo M. Mielczarek

In the course of archaeological excavations a denarius of Marcus Aurelius dating to 163 has been found, as well as an antoninianus of Philip the Arab (244-249). Single finds of coins struck by Commodus (180-192), Septimius Severus (193-211) have been also noted.

Interesting is that among coins found in Roman necropolis are bronze coins of Histria, which are characteristic for Greek Nikonion.⁴⁶

The main change in the case of Nikonion was a change of inhabitants. In the Roman period the city was inhabited by the Late Scythians, which have arrived from Crimea. Some evidence of Sarmatian influence in the city of Roman time has been also noted.⁴⁷

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⁴⁶ Bruâko, Dzigovskij, Sekerskaâ 2008: 187.

⁴⁷ Bruâko, Dzigovskij, Sekerskaâ 2008: 182.



Fig. 11. Photo M. Mielczarek

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- AAL* – Acta Archaeologica Lodziensia, Łódź
FAH – Fasciculi Archaeologiae Historicae, Łódź
MASP – Materiały po Archeologii Severnogo Pročernomor'â, Odesa, Kiev
NiE – Numizmatika i Epigrafika, Moskva
SCIVA – Studii și Cercetarii de Istorie Veche și Archeologie, Bucuresti
VDI – Vestnik Drevnej Istorii, Moskva
ZOAO – Zapiski Odesskogo Arheologičeskogo Obščestva, Odessa
ZPE – Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik, Bonn

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