

Contributions to the History of the Romanian Monetary Lexicon: Names of Turkish Coins That Circulated in the Lower Danube Area. II. The Yirmilik [1]

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Abstract:

The history of the Romanian lexicon is complex, especially because the vocabulary has been permanently enriched with borrowings from the languages of the different peoples and civilisations with which it came into contact. These borrowings are the result of the historical circumstances and the geographical context in which the Romanian language evolved. Most of the neighbouring idioms, including Turkish, contributed to the enrichment of the Romanian monetary lexicon. It should be emphasised that the names of coins of Turkish origin were known to the inhabitants of both Romanian principalities but given the geographical proximity and direct commercial relations, especially to those from Wallachia and Moldova. However, in order not to abuse the reader's patience and the editorial space made available, and because the attestations of coins of Turkish origin that circulated in our reference space are relatively abundant, we will focus on only one of them in the following, as a stage of our approach.

Keywords: names of coins, Turkish, Yirmilik

INTRODUCTION AND MOTIVATION OF THE STUDY

The history of the Romanian lexicon is complex, especially because the vocabulary has been permanently enriched with borrowings from the languages of the different peoples and civilisations with which it came into contact. These borrowings are the result of the historical circumstances and the geographical context in which the Romanian language evolved. Most of the neighbouring idioms contributed to the enrichment of the Romanian monetary lexicon, including Turkish. It should be emphasised that the names of coins of Turkish origin [2] were known to the inhabitants of both Romanian principalities but given the geographical proximity and direct trade relations, especially to those from Wallachia and Moldova. The various documentary sources that I had access to (documents, scientific works, collections of folklore, but also common expressions taken from literature) record monetary terms, taken into Romanian under the forms such as: *accea*, *altmişlic*, *beşlic*, *caimea*, *cercliu*, *direcliu*, *funduc*, *irmilic*, *iuzluc*, *mahmudea*, *mangâr*, *misir*, *nisfea*, *onluc*, *para*, *rubia*, *sabaş*, *tult*, *tunus*, *turaliu*, *zingiriu*, etc.

I will try, through the present intervention, part of a wider approach, to trace, one by one, the attestation of some of these terms in the written language, and the evolution of the numismatic pieces they name, offering some relative landmarks to their circulation in the

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Romanian space, from a historical point of view. However, in order not to abuse the reader's patience and the editorial space made available, because the attestations of coins of Turkish origin that circulated in our reference space are relatively abundant, we will focus on only one of them in the following, as a stage of our approach. For the same reasons, although some of the coin names benefit from extensive documentation, I have provided only examples that I considered more eloquent for the issues presented.

YIRMILIK – APPEARANCE AND DOCUMENTARY ATTESTATIONS

The *Yirmilik* is an Ottoman silver coin, issued in the second part of the reign of Sultan Ahmed III (1703-1730), having the value of 20 Para, equivalent to $\frac{1}{2}$ Kurush; the name of this coin is derived from the Turkish term *igirmi*, or his popular form *irmi* (= 20). Good quality pieces were also released during the reign of Mahmud I (1730-1754), remaining in circulation for a long time. They have identified in hoards discovered both in Wallachia and in Moldova, the period of intense circulation of the "half-Kurush" seems to be placed in the fifth-seventh decades of the 18th century. [3] As it was observed from the analysis of hoard finds in which this denomination is present, there is a preference for older issues, a fact explained by the changes that took place in the Ottoman monetary system at the beginning of the reign of Sultan Mustafa III, when there was a significant depreciation of the Kurush and his submultiples.[4] This situation is almost impossible to be surprised by documentary sources.

Allusions appear only when the rates of the coins are reiterated, and the distinction between the old *Yirmilik* and the new *Yirmilik* appears, for example, on September 5, 1836, when they were worth 14 and respectively 13 lei [5], and by 1840 when they were worth 16 and respectively 14 lei.[6] It is often associated with another golden coin, the *Icosar* (= penny of 20), which was worth 20 piastres.[7]

In this sense, see also the example imagined by V. A. Urechia: „... I open the package in which I find – oh! disappointment! An *Yirmilik* and a tie [...]. – Pity, kindness of love letter, only an *Icosar*! [...]. However, I collected the *Yirmilik*, in the empty bag”.[8] The numismatic pieces have the same value also in the list of rates submitted by the Minister of Finance to ruler Al. I. Cuza, where "*Icosarul* (*Yirmilik*)” is valued at 12.10 lei.[9]

On the other hand, the Monetary Law of 1867 regulated the exchange rate of foreign currencies, including the "*Icosar* (*Yirmilik*) worth 4.44 lei”.[10] At other times, the *Yirmilik* is associated with another silver coin, called the *Medjidie* (after the name of the issuer, Sultan Abdul Medjid I, in 1844) which was also worth 20 piastres.[11]

The coin we are interested in had already come to the attention of speculators, so on July 25, 1835 „The council decides that until the golden (coins) is reduced by $31\frac{1}{2}$, the brokers cannot take more than half of the decided amount, i.e. 10 paras each for golden, 4 paras for *Yirmilik* and *Carboava*, and 2 Paras for *Sorocovăț*”.[12]

A year later, on August 21, the residents of Bârlad drafted a letter requesting the ban on brokers in the markets, showing that "the <white golden> costs $38\frac{1}{2}$ lei, the <yellow bird> 37 lei, the *Yirmilik* 17, the *Rubia* 7.10, paras and the *Carboave* 13 lei”.[13]

On December 22, 1836, it was decided not to take more than 2 paras when changing the *Yirmilik* or *Carboave*; otherwise "terrible punishments are foreseen”.[14]

Financial adjustments were taking place all the time, for example, in 1837 the Galați governor informed the Treasury that the ship *Ferdinand* had brought there "more than 40,000 new *Yirmilik* in groups, for the needs of speculation, which was going to turn them

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into obsolete Turkish coins, exchanging them for the fixed prices and then benefiting from the increased rate of coins in Constantinople".[15]

Another documentary attestation that I came across dates from October 28, 1837: "Let's have your answer for the gold money, how do you receive the Yirmilik and the golden ones which here were to be changed twelve the new Yirmilik and thirty-five the golden ones".[16]

This coin is often mentioned in "rewarding" contexts, for example, related to the memory of the boyar family from which Gheorghe Sion came: "A villager went with a rooster to the boyar's day, and the boyar tipped him with an Yirmilik"[17] or "be careful when you come, to know the catechism by heart and to say the creed in church and the Our Father, then I will give you an Yirmilik".[18]

Some parties generate to match excitement, so that "I have seen him fill the fiddler's violin with Yirmiliks".[19]

Even sins are no longer unforgivable, of course for the appropriate "consideration": "for every major sin, let him pay one Yirmilik / And the beloved a smaller one".[20]

The currency we are interested in often finds its place in "negotiation" practices, as in a Romanian verse which can be translated like this: "Green leaf and a tulip, / look at my crazy / I ask her and she doesn't want it. / I'll give her a beaten lion / To let me kiss her / She takes me up to an Yirmilik; / I would still give her the Yirmilik, / (but) the value goes up to a golden/ And I would give her the golden / But I am very afraid that he will deceive me"...[21]

Without having a very high value – of course, it did not enjoy the appreciation of gold pieces – the Yirmilik did not, however, symbolise lack, scarcity or poverty, on the contrary, it represents only a good start, as in the example given by the uncle Dumitrachi, who told his story: "I started the business with an Yirmilik – that's all I had".[22]

More concretely, and by referring to the social hierarchy, the reiterated reality emerges from the following dialogue: „– Hey, Ioane, if only I had as many thousands of golden coins as the number of times, I passed here on Lunga! – Then, I, Father Vlădica, would agree to have Yirmiliks too [...]".[23]

On the other hand, Madame Chirița's experience in Paris "in the wonder of wonders" is derogatory, because a piece of steak is "as big as an Yirmilik", and the crayfish is "in seven months, shrivelled and flabby like woe to them".[24]

In any case, the Yirmilik is the object of hoarding, as we have seen, being well represented in the archaeological discoveries, but documented "literally" and in some accumulations, as in the case of His Holiness, who "collected pennies [...]. It is a little pouch of thick leather with several hundred toothed marigolds, royal, upright, without brim, and well washed, and there are several woollen slippers, filled with Turkish Yirmiliks and German sorcoveți".[25]; or in another case, "He had herds, / He had strong men, / He had bags of Yirmiliks".[26]

Ironic is without a doubt the line dedicated to King Danciu: "the sword under the hilt / Under the hilt was worth a Yirmilik"[26], but I think that, in this context, it is not an allusion to the value of the clothing accessory, but it refers to the material from which it was made. Although our explanatory dictionaries do not retain this meaning of the term Yirmilik, through the previous example, but also through others, the meaning of mat (= waterproof cloth by varnishing or waxing on one side, used in the household, in workshops, etc.) can be documented for protection; object made of such cloth, cf. Dexonline = *The Explanatory dictionary of the Romanian language*). Otherwise, "Yirmilik" is the name of a popular game

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(hora) practised as part of wedding customs[27], also called "mat", a synonymy that probably shifted in the opposite direction as well, the Yirmilik coming to take over the main meaning of the latter term, that of material, as in the example: "in the fenced yard, where once the boyar Petrescu used to walk in Yirmilik slippers among the lilac bushes of the mansion".[28] The name of the coin is also well attested in the "outlaw songs", the popular hero being, for example, urged to action "That he walks on the foothills / (with) Three bags of Yirmiliks / And of Venice goldens"[29] or "He was counting the money in his lap / Ten bags of Yirmiliks / Eight small rubies / And about three of Venice goldens"[30]. And in the case of Yirmiliks, given the raw material from which they were minted, we have documented hoarding in the form of ornaments and/or clothing accessories, sometimes with dire consequences: "for these ornaments Turkish coins were mainly used, such as icosari, Yirmiliks, Mahmudiyes, then Austrian and Hungarian goldens, and other coins. A bad year was coming, then the hoarded coins had to come out of the chest and improve things, and so they appeared mutilated and broken in the trade".[31] A collected ballad from the Moldavian area "speaks" in the same sense: "And the necklace is made of Yirmiliks, / Made by two brave men".[32]

CONCLUSIONS

These are, very briefly, the considerations we make on the name of a currency that has made a certain "career" especially in the internal and external commercial relations of the Romanian countries. Its presence, suggestively illustrated and in a literary way, is not an exception, on the contrary, it confirms some historical realities. For the late medieval period, the Yirmilik was present to support various transactions but given the precious metal from which it was made, it was still hoarded, being remembered in various accumulations of valuable goods.

GLOSSARY OF USED NUMISMATIC TERMS

- *icosar* = Turkish golden coin worth 20 piastres, named by the Greek term „είκοσάρι” (derived from *eikosi* = 20):
- *carboavă* = silver coin, named from the Russian *karbovanec'* = “to notch, crimp”;
- *leu / lei* = Romanian currency;
- *mahmudea* = ottoman golden coin *mahmudiyé* called by the Sultan Mahmud II;
- *rubia* = ottoman small golden coin worth ¼ from an Zeri Mahbub; from the Turkish *rub'* = quarter / the fourth part;
- *sorocovăț* = silver coin, named after the Ukrainian *sorokovec'*.

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[7] C. Diaconovich, *Enciclopedia română (publicată din însărcinarea și sub auspiciile Asociațiunii pentru Literatura Română și Cultura Poporului Român)*, tomul II, Sibiu, 1900, p. 880, see *ISMILIC*.

[8] V. A. Urechia, *Bacșișul meu de anul nou*, în *Familia*, nr. I, anul XXXI, 1895, p. 9.

[9] C. I. Băicoianu, *op. cit.*, p. 257.

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[11] Gavr. Todiciă, *Viața economică. VII. Banii*, în *Tovărășia*, anul IV, nr. 10, 7/20 novembre 1909, p. 4 (20 piaștri = 1 medjidie = 1 irmilic).

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