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INSTITUTUL DE ARHEOLOGIE „VASILE PÂRVAN”

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Sturgeons in medieval Moldova

Roman CROITOR*

Since ancient times, sturgeons have been highly prized fishery resources in the Black Sea region[1], valued both for their exceptional size and for the high nutritional and culinary quality of their flesh and caviar. Their economic and trade importance remained significant in the region until recent times. Historical, archaeological, and archaeozoological sources provide abundant evidence for the remarkable richness of the ichthyofauna in the water bodies of Medieval Moldova. Only a few centuries ago, the ichthyofauna of the northwestern Black Sea region and southeastern Europe included five native sturgeon species that inhabited both rivers and coastal waters.

The larger species, beluga (*Huso huso*), Danube (or Russian, or Black Sea) sturgeon (*Acipenser gueldenstaedtii*), starry (or stellate) sturgeon (*Acipenser stellatus*), and ship sturgeon (*Acipenser nudiventris*), were anadromous migratory fishes (Fig. 1), mainly inhabiting river deltas and estuaries and ascending rivers only during the spawning season. One smaller species, the sterlet (*Acipenser ruthenus*), was an exclusively freshwater fish and inhabited the rivers of Moldova[2].

The beluga was the largest sturgeon species of the Moldovan ichthyofauna, reaching lengths of 4–5 m and body weights exceeding 1000 kg. Historical records indicate that belugas once migrated up the Dniester River as far as the Soroca–Rîbniţa section, before the construction of the Dubăsari hydroelectric dam. The Danube sturgeon, with a body length of 1–2 m and a weight up to 80 kg, is reported to have migrated up the Dniester as far as Hotin.

The starry sturgeon, reaching up to 2 m in length and around 80 kg in weight, was the most common representative of the family Acipenseridae in ancient Moldova. In the Dniester River, it migrated as far upstream as Soroca. The ship sturgeon was known from the Danube and its tributaries, including the Prut River; mature individuals reached 80–100 cm in length and 7–15 kg in weight.

The sterlet, the smallest sturgeon species in ancient Moldova, attained a body length of up to 125 cm and a mass of approximately 16 kg. This species is easily recognizable by its distinctive "dolphin-shaped" head and elongated, pointed snout (Fig. 1).

Although historical evidence of sturgeon fishing in Medieval Moldova is fragmentary, it nonetheless provides valuable insights into its former economic significance. The following overview summarizes historical testimonies on sturgeon fishing in Moldova from the 17th to the 19th centuries, indicating a gradual decline in abundance and economic role.

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[1] V. F. Stolba, *Fish and Money: Numismatic Evidence for Black Sea Fishing*, in Tønnes Bekker-Nielsen (ed.), *Ancient fishing and fish processing in the Black Sea region*, Aarhus, 2005, p. 115-132.

[2] I. M. Ganya (ed.), *Fish, Amphibians, Reptiles*, Series: Animal World of Moldavia, Chişinău, 1981.

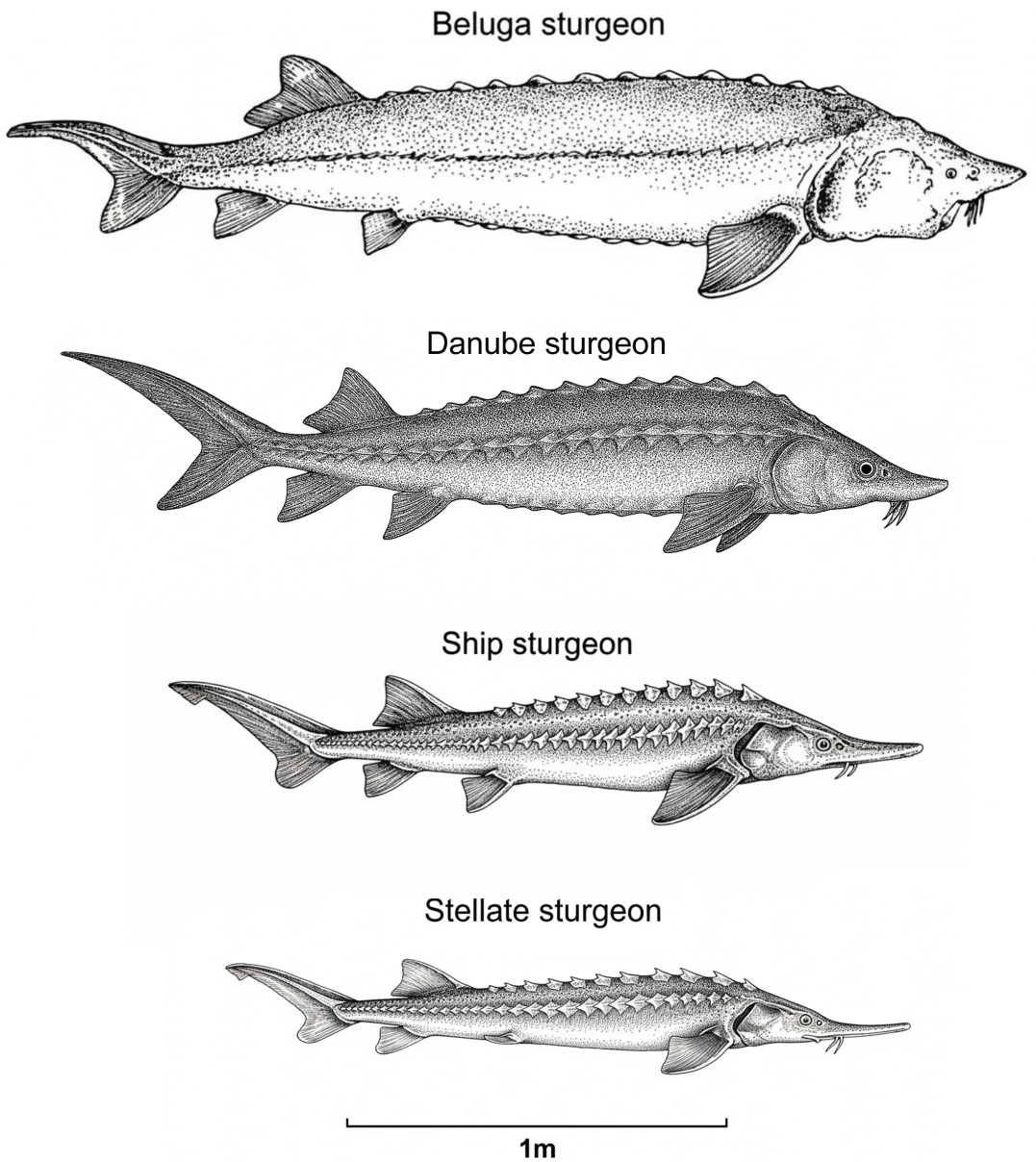

Fig. 1. Sturgeon species of major importance in the Danube (after L. Bartosiewicz, C. Bonsall, V. Şişu, *Sturgeon fishing in the middle and lower Danube Region*, in *The iron gates in prehistory. New perspectives*, Antibes, 2008, p. 43, Fig. 5).

The Italian monk Niccolò Barsari, who visited Moldova between 1633 and 1639, reported that fishermen brought between 1,000 and 2,000 sturgeons daily to Chilia. Another Italian traveler, Bishop Bandini, confirmed in 1646 that exceptionally large belugas were caught in Moldovan waters. Later, the French consul Peyssonnel reported in 1762 that about 25,000 belugas were captured annually at Chilia[3]. From there, sturgeons were exported to Constantinople, Vienna, as well as to Poland and Hungary.

[3] C. C. Giurescu, *Istoria pescuitului şi a pisciculturii în România*, Bucureşti, 1964.

Curiously, Dimitrie Cantemir does not mention sturgeons in his *Descriptio Moldaviae*[4]. When describing fisheries in Medieval Moldova, Cantemir emphasized the exquisite taste of fish from the mountain rivers, while overlooking the fisheries of the sea coast, the Danube, and the lowland rivers, habitats where sturgeons lived and spawned.

Later, P. P. Svinyin provided a detailed account of fisheries in his description of Bessarabia, noting that beluga and other sturgeons constituted the majority of the fish catch and were exported in large quantities to Austria. He also mentioned the sterlet caught in the Danube. According to Svinyin, the abundant sturgeons and sterlets of the Dniester and its estuary held major economic importance for Moldavian coastal towns and villages[5].

M. Bugnion published the first concise scientific description of the Moldavian ichthyofauna, giving particular attention to the economic importance of sturgeons in Bessarabia, especially the very large individuals from the Danube, whose meat and caviar were exported. Bugnion also praised the high quality of sterlets caught in the region[6].

Z. Arbure listed *Acipenser suris* and *Acipenser ciclostomus* (apparently forgotten synonyms of the species mentioned above) among the ichthyofauna of Bessarabia. According to Arbure, sturgeon (*nisetru*), sterlet (*cegă*), and beluga (*morun*) were still being caught in the Dniester estuary by the late nineteenth century, although he noted that the sterlet had nearly disappeared from Bessarabia[7].

Among the commercially important species, L. Berg also recorded the beluga, Russian (or Danube) sturgeon, and starry sturgeon. However, he observed that the number of sturgeons caught had become negligible. The sterlet had likewise become very rare in the Dniester, though it remained somewhat more common in the Danube[8].

The decline and eventual disappearance of sturgeons in the region during the nineteenth century were attributed to overfishing and habitat degradation caused by deforestation, river regulation, dam construction, water pollution, and the disturbance produced by steamboats and timber rafting[9].

Sturgeons were an important economic and strategic resource in ancient Moldova, particularly in Bessarabia, until the 18th–19th centuries, when they became rare or extinct in Western and Central Europe. L. Bartosiewicz and C. Bonsall report that sturgeon remains were already scarce in 16th–17th-century Hungary[10], while in Western and Northern Europe, sturgeons had largely disappeared from fisheries and consumption by the 12th–13th centuries[11]. In thirteenth-century France and England, all sturgeons were

---

[4] D. Cantemir, *Descrierea Moldovei* (1789), trad. P. Pandrea cu pref. C.I. Gulian, Bucureşti, 1956.

[5] П. П. Свиньин, *Описание Бессарабской области. Записки Одесского общества истории и древностей*, Одесса, 1867, с. 175-320 [P.P. Svinyin, *Description of Bessarabian Region,* in *Notes of the Society of History and Antiquities of Odessa*, VI, Odessa, 1867, p. 175-320].

[6] M. Bugnion, *La Bessarabie ancienne et moderne : Ouvrage Historique, Geographique et Statistique*, Laussane-Odessa, 1846.

[7] Z. C. Arbure, *Basarabia în secolul XIX*, Bucuresci, 1898.

[8] Л. С. Берг, *Бессарабия : страна — люди — хозяйство*, Петроград, 1918. [L. S. Berg, *Bessarabia: country – people – economy*, Petrograd, 1918].

[9] N. Bacalbaşa-Dobrovici, *Endangered migratory sturgeons of the lower Danube River and its delta*, Environmental Biology of Fishes, 48, 1997, p. 201-207; L. Bartosiewicz, C. Bonsall, V. Şişu, *Sturgeon fishing in the middle and lower Danube Region*, in C. Bonsal, V. Boroneaţ, I. Radovanović (eds), *The iron gates in prehistory. New perspectives*, Oxford, 2008, p. 39-54.

[10] L. Bartosiewicz, C. Bonsall, *Complementary taphonomies: Medieval sturgeons from Hungary*, in P. Bearez, S. Grouard, B. Clavel (eds.), *Archeologie du poisson. 30 ans d'archeo-ichtyologie au CNRS*, Antibes, 2008, p. 35-45.

[11] R.C. Hoffmann, *Economic Development and Aquatic Ecosystems in Medieval Europe*, The American Historical Review, 101 (3), 1996, p. 631-669.

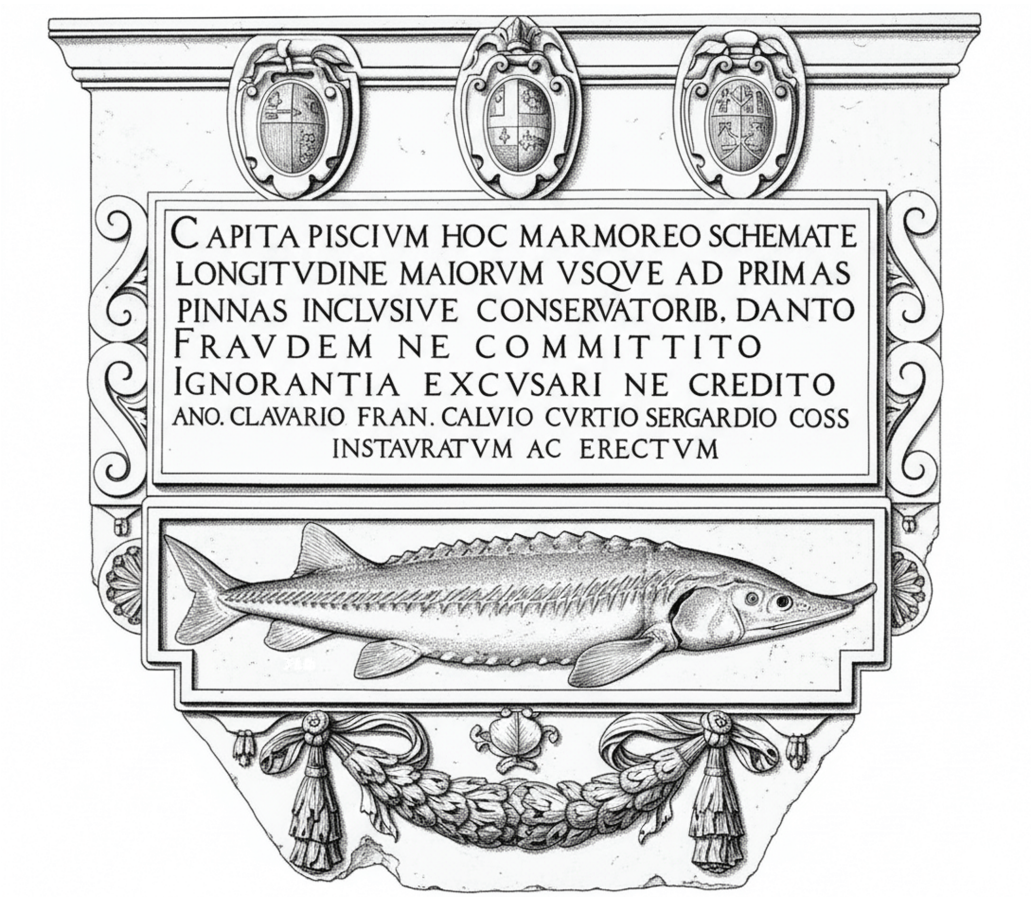

Fig. 2. Roman marble plaque, Capitoline Museums, Rome, showing a 115 cm sturgeon used as a *regulum* to set minimum legal catch size.

reserved for the king[12], and in Medieval Hungary, beluga sturgeon became known as the "Royal Fish"[13], reflecting both its rarity and its highly prized meat.

The marble plaque preserved in the Capitoline Museums, depicting a sturgeon (Fig. 2), dates back to the late 15th century. It served as a *regulum*, an official reference measure, to control the fish trade in Rome. The Latin inscription warns merchants that fish heads exceeding the indicated length must be surrendered to market conservators. The bas-relief shows a sturgeon 115 cm long, which functioned as a *regulum*, the official reference measure. This standard established the minimum legal size for catches, meaning that the capture of smaller sturgeons was prohibited, an early effort at resource conservation[14]. The plaque also indicates that sturgeon was a highly prized delicacy in Italy, reserved for papal and

[12] *Ibidem,* p. 631-669.

[13] L. Bartosiewicz, C. Bonsall, *op. cit.*, p. 39-54.

[14] P. Bronzi, G. Castaldelli, S. Cataudella, R. Rossi, *The Historical and Contemporary Status of the European Sturgeon,* Acipenser sturio *L., in Italy*, in P. Williot *et alii* (eds), *Biology and Conservation of the European Sturgeon* Acipenser sturio *L. 1758*, Berlin, Heidelberg, 2011, p. 227-41.

aristocratic tables. The plaque thus serves as a rare testimony to both the cultural prestige of sturgeon and the early signs of its scarcity.

At the same time, sturgeons maintained economic importance and availability in Moldova. Recent excavations conducted by the National Archaeological Agency in 2013–2014 at the Late Medieval Moldavian town of Lăpuşna (now Hînceşti District, Republic of Moldova) yielded osteological remains of a large sturgeon, possibly *Acipenser gueldenstaedtii*, including dorsal and lateral scutes and pectoral rays, recovered from pit No. 3.

Although limited in number (ca. 40 fragments among 2,378 total bones), these remains are comparable to those of some domestic animals and are notable because sturgeon remains are already uncommon in Late Medieval European sites[15].

The apparent scarcity of sturgeon bones at the Lăpuşna site likely reflects their largely cartilaginous skeleton, with only scutes and pectoral rays preserved, combined with the tendency of ossified elements to reabsorb minerals with age, which makes them susceptible to destruction or erosion. Nevertheless, the presence of sturgeon remains at Lăpuşna underscores both the town's high status and the economic importance of sturgeons in Medieval Moldova.

At that time, Lăpuşna occupied a strategic location at the crossroads of major European trade routes, developing into an important customs post and market town (*târg*). During the 15th–16th centuries, it served as the administrative centre of the Ţinutul Lăpuşnei, governed by a *pârcălab* (regional governor), and hosted a princely court (*Curtea Domnească*), associated with Alexandru Lăpuşneanu.

Acknowledgements: This research was supported by the Moldova State University Subprogram 010701.

[15] L. Bartosiewicz, C. Bonsall, *op. cit.*, p. 39-54.

Abrevieri

ActaMN	Acta Musei Napocensis, Cluj-Napoca
AÉ	L'Année épigraphique, Paris
AJN	American Journal of Numismatics, New York
ANRW	Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt
ANS	American Numismatic Society, New York
ARA	Asociația Arhitectură. Restaurare. Arheologie
ArhMold	Arheologia Moldovei, Iaşi-Bucureşti
BAR, I.S.	*British Archaeological Reports*, *International Series,* Oxford
BAR, S.S.	British Archaeological Reports, Supplementary Series, Oxford
BMC	*Coins of the Roman Empire in the British Museum*, Londra: I, *Augustus to Vitellius*, 1923; II, *Vespasian to Domitian*, 1930; III, *Nerva to Hadrian*, 1936; IV, *Antoninus Pius to Commodus*, 1968; V, *Pertinax to Elagabalus*, 1950 (H. Mattingly); VI, *Severus Alexander to Balbinus and Pupienus*, 1962 (R.A.G. Carson)
BSNR	Buletinul Societăţii Numismatice Române, Bucureşti
BIAB	Bulletin de l'Institut Archéologique Bulgare, Sofia
CAB	Cercetări Arheologice în Bucureşti, Bucureşti
CCA	Cronica cercetărilor arheologice din România, Bucureşti
CICSA	Centrul de Istorie Comparată a Societăților Antice, București
CIL III	Th. Mommsen (ed.), *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum. Vol. 3, Parts 1-2. Inscriptiones Asiae, provinciarum Europae Graecarum, Illyrici Latinae*, Berlin, 1873.
CN	Cercetări Numismatice, Bucureşti
CNA	Cronica Numismatică şi Arheologică, Bucureşti
CNH	L. Réthy, Corpus nummorum Hungariae, I-II, Budapesta, 1899-1907
CNRS	Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris
Crawford, RRC	M.H. Crawford, *Roman Republican Coinage*, Cambridge, 1974
Crawford, RRCH	M.H. Crawford, *Roman Republican Coin Hoards*, Londra, 1969
CreştCol	Creşterea Colecţiilor, Biblioteca Academiei Române, Bucureşti
Dacia	Dacia. Recherches et découvertes archéologiques en Roumanie, Bucureşti, I-XII (1924-1947)
Dacia, N.S.	Dacia, Revue d'Archéologie et d'Histoire Ancienne, Nouvelle Série, Bucureşti (1957-)
DIR	*Documente privind istoria României*
D.J.A.N. Argeş	Direcția Județeană a Arhivelor Naționale Argeş
DOW-LRC	Ph. Grierson, Melinda Mays, *Catalogue of Late Roman coins in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection and in the Whittemore Collection. From Arcadius and Honorius to the Accession of Anastasius*, Washington, 1992
DRH	*Documenta Romaniae Historica*, Bucureşti
Herinek	L. Herinek, *Österreichische Münzprägungen von 1740-1969*, Viena, 1970
Huszár	Lajos Huszár, *Münzkatalog Ungarn von 1000 bis heute*, Budapesta, 1979
IAB	Institutul de Arheologie „Vasile Pârvan", Bucureşti
IGBulg II	G. Mihailov (ed.), *Inscriptiones Graecae in Bulgaria repertae*. *Vol. II. Inscriptiones inter Danubium et Haenum repertae*, Sofia, 1958.

SCN, s.n., XV-XVII (XXVII-XXIX), Bucureşti, 2026, p. 227-229.

ISM	*Inscriptiones Scythiae minoris*, I (1983), II (1987), III (1999), IV (2015), V (1980)
JIAI	Journal for Historical and Archaeological Research, Šumen
JNG	Jahrbuch für Numismatik und Geldgeschichte, München
LRBC	*Late Roman Bronze Coinage A.D. 324-498*, Londra, 1965: I – P.V. Hill, J.P.C. Kent, The Bronze Coinage of the House of Constantine A.D. 324-346; II – R.A.G. Carson, J.P.C. Kent, *Bronze Roman Imperial Coinage of the Later Empire A.D. 346-498*
Martin	F. Martin, *Kolonialprägungen aus Moesia Superior und Dacia*, Bonn, 1992
MBR	G. Buzdugan, O. Luchian, C.C. Oprescu, *Monede și bancnote românești*, Bucureşti, 1977
MCA	Materiale şi Cercetări Arheologice, Bucureşti
MemAntiq	Memoria Antiquitatis, Piatra-Neamţ
MINAC	Muzeul de Istorie Naţională şi Arheologie, Constanţa
MJIAP	Muzeul Județean de Istorie și Arheologie Prahova
MNA	Muzeul Naţional de Antichităţi
NC	Numismatic Chronicle, Londra
NK	Numizmatikai Közlöny, Budapesta
NZ	Numismatische Zeitschrift, Viena
Pere	Nuri Pere, *Osmanlılarda madenî paralar*, Istanbul, 1968
Pick	B. Pick, *Die antiken Münzen von Dacien und Moesien*, I, 1, Berlin, 1898
Pick-Regling	B. Pick, K. Regling, *Die antiken Münzen von Dacien und Moesien*, I, 2, Berlin, 1910
Pohl	Artúr Pohl, *Münzzeichen und Meisterzeichen auf ungarischen Münzen des Mittelalters, 1300-1540*, Graz-Budapesta, 1982
Preda	C. Preda, *Monedele geto-dacilor*, Bucureşti, 1973
RCAN	Revista de Cercetări Arheologice și Numismatice, Bucureşti
Recueil	W.H. Waddington, E.Babelon, Th. Reinach, *Recueil général des monnaies grecques d'Asie Minéure, I-IV,* Paris, 1904-1912
RÉSEE	Revue des Études Sud-Est Européennes, Bucureşti
RI	Studii, 1948–1952; din 1953, Studii. Revista de Istorie, Bucureşti.
RIC, I	H. Mattingly, E.A. Sydenham, *The Roman Imperial Coinage*, I, *Augustus to Vitellius*, Londra, 1923
RIC, I^2	C.H.V. Sutherland, *The Roman Imperial Coinage*, I, ediţie revăzută, Londra, 1984
RIC, II	H. Mattingly, E.A. Sydenham, *The Roman Imperial Coinage*, II, *Vespasian to Hadrian*, Londra, 1926
RIC, III	H. Mattingly, E.A. Sydenham, *The Roman Imperial Coinage*, III, *Antoninus Pius to Commodus*, Londra, 1930
RIC, IV, 1	H. Mattingly, E.A. Sydenham, *The Roman Imperial Coinage*, IV, 1, *Pertinax to Geta*, Londra, 1968
RIC, V, 2	P.H. Webb, *The Roman Imperial Coinage*, V, 2, Londra, 1933 (reimprimat 1968)
RIC, VI	C.H.V. Sutherland, *The Roman Imperial Coinage*, VI, *From Diocletian's reform (A.D. 294) to the death of Maximinus (A.D. 313)*, Londra, 1967
RIC, VII	P.M. Bruun, *The Roman Imperial Coinage*, VII, *Constantine and Licinius A.D. 313-337)*, Londra, 1966
RIC, VIII	J.P.C. Kent, *The Roman Imperial Coinage*, VIII, *The Family of Constantine I A.D. 337-364)*, Londra, 1981
RIC, IX	J.W.E. Pearce, *The Roman Imperial Coinage*, IX, *Valentinian I-Theodosius I*, Londra, 1933 (reimprimat 1968)
RIC, X	J.P.C. Kent, *The Roman Imperial Coinage*, X, *The Divided Empire and the Fall of the Western Parts A.D. 395-491)*, Londra, 1994
RPC	Roman Provincial Coinage

Ruzicka 1928	Leon Ruzicka, *Inedita aus Moesia Inferior*, Vjesnik Hrvatskoga Arheološkoga Društva, 15, 1928, p. 225-248.
SCBC	*Standard Catalogue of British Coins. Coins of England and the United Kingdom*, 41st Edition, London, 2006
SCIV(A)	Studii şi Cercetări de Istorie Veche (şi Arheologie), Bucureşti
SCN	Studii şi Cercetări de Numismatică, Bucureşti
SHA	*Scriptores Historiae Augustae*
Simpozion Chişinău 2000	*Simpozion de Numismatică dedicat împlinirii a patru secole de la prima Unire a românilor sub Mihai Voievod Viteazul, Chişinău, 28-30 mai 2000, Comunicări, studii şi note*, Bucureşti, 2001
Simpozion Chişinău 2001	*Simpozion de Numismatică organizat în memoria martirilor căzuţi la Valea Albă, la împlinirea a 525 de ani (1476-2001), Chişinău, 13-15 mai 2001, Comunicări, studii şi note*, Bucureşti, 2002
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