

# PONTIC BRONZE MITHRADATIC OVERSTRIKES: A CATALOGUE AND A SCENARIO

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**Keywords:** *Pontus, Mithridates Eupator, monetary production, coin overstrikes, Pontic chronology.*

**Abstract:** *This paper gathers and discusses the 28 recorded cases of overstrikes for Pontic bronze coins. The most attested case is for the type "Aegis/Nike" overstriking the type "Ares/sword". It may well be that the value of the type "Aegis/Nike" was superior to the tetrachalkoi generally attributed to the type "Ares/sword". As the type "Aegis/Nike" has been produced in truly gigantic quantities (several hundred of obverse dies), it is not unlikely that these bronze coins supposed to have served for paying garrisons have played a significant role in the war economy of the last Pontic king.*

As a tribute to the memory of Alexandru Avram, such a great master of the Black Sea, I publish here the catalogue of all the known (to me) cases of overstrikes for Mithradatic bronze coins. This contribution leaves thus apart the even greater number of cases for which Mithradatic bronzes were overstruck in the Bosphorus kingdom by cities such as Pantikapaion, Gorgippia and Phanagoria or dynasts such as Asander. As such, it goes further than the preliminary lists I already gave<sup>1</sup>. It improves them too since, in a couple of cases, checks prove to be inconclusive with the proposed identifications. It also takes advantage of the Greek Overstrikes Database (GOD), a project launched by David MacDonald and I<sup>2</sup>, and its recent website developed in the frame of the ERC project SILVER<sup>3</sup>. This

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<sup>1</sup> See CALLATAÏ 2007, p. 288–289 (5 illustrations for 18 allegedly overstruck coins) and CALLATAÏ 2010, p. 272 (no illustration, 24 allegedly overstruck coins).

<sup>2</sup> [https://silver.knowledge.wiki/Greek\\_Overstrikes\\_Database](https://silver.knowledge.wiki/Greek_Overstrikes_Database). See CALLATAÏ 2017 and 2018 (for a first full landscape of the phenomenon).

<sup>3</sup> I am most grateful to Francis Albarède who accepted to put money in the construction of this database, and to Caroline Carrier, the historian who introduced most of the data; and to Bernhard Krabina, the IT specialist who created the website.

is the first paper dealing with overstrikes for which each coin has been referenced with its GOD number.

Coins are here classified in the geographical order (first Pontus, second Paphlagonia) and then alphabetically inside each area. The chronology of these Mithradatic bronze coin issues is notoriously difficult to establish. As already argued elsewhere, it cannot be question to follow the grouping and the dates proposed in 1912 by Friedrich Imhoof-Blumer<sup>4</sup>, as isolated finds (Delos) and hoards (in Piraeus) are both damaging for his chronology.

### 1. Catalogue

#### Pontus

##### *Amasia*

Obv.: Head of Ares r.

Rev.: AMAΣ-ΣΕΙΑ. Sword.

1 - GOD 3039 Winterthur 2335 – L. Hamburger 1887 (7.68 g, 22.8 mm, 12 h; overstruck on undetermined type).



##### *Amisos*

Obv.: Head of Ares r.

Rev.: AMI-ΣΟΥ. Sword.

2 - GOD 2828 Cambridge, Fitzwilliam, Mossop coll. (6.58 g, 19 mm, 1 h; overstruck on undetermined type).



<sup>4</sup> IMHOOF-BLUMER 1912. See also CALLATAÏ 2005.

- 3 - GOD 2676 Stancomb coll. 676 (7.28 g; overstruck on undetermined type).



Obv.: Head of Athena r.  
Rev.: AMI-ΣΟΥ. Perseus standing.

- 4 - GOD 2818 New York, ANS, 40.77.93 gift Hasker (19.45 g; overstruck on 'Zeus/Eagle').



- 5 - GOD 3257 Paris, BnF 223 (18.77 g, 29 mm, 12 h; overstruck on 'Zeus/Eagle?').



6 - GOD 3215 Mözelt, list 93, May 1997, 33 (29 mm; overstruck on 'Zeus/Eagle?').



7 - GOD 21811. Savoca Store, Sept. 2023 (18,68 g, 30 mm; overstruck on 'Zeus/Eagle').



Obv.: Aegis.

Rev.: AMIΣΟΥ. Nike standing l., holding a branch<sup>5</sup>.

8 - GOD 3722 Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, Mossop coll. (7.95 g; overstruck on 'Ares/Sword').



<sup>5</sup> See also the non-illustrated bronzes (on undetermined types) in IRELAND 2000 (Museum of Amasya), p. 22 (no. 742 and 766) and p. 23 (no. 839).

9 - GOD 3386 Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum 15073 (7.79 g; overstruck on 'Ares/Sword').



10 - GOD 2880 Istanbul, Sadberk Hanım Museum 12858 = Sivas hoard 103 (8.12 g, 21 mm, 12 h; overstruck on 'Ares/Sword').



11 - GOD 3743 Istanbul, Sadberk Hanım Museum 12551 = Sivas hoard 137 (7.61g, 21mm, 12h; overstruck on 'Ares/Sword').



12 - GOD 3851 Istanbul, Sadberk Hanım Museum 12961 = Sivas hoard 255 (7.96 g, 22 mm, 12 h; overstruck on 'Ares/Sword').



13 - GOD 3293 Ebay Highrating-Lowprice i14123 (6.70 g, 21 mm; overstruck on 'Ares/Sword').

[http://www.ebay.com/itm/AMISOS-Mithrdates-the-GREAT-Time119BC-Greek-Coin-AEGIS-Nike-Gorgon-i14123/350937366974?pt=LH\\_DefaultDomain\\_0&hash=item51b57f41be](http://www.ebay.com/itm/AMISOS-Mithrdates-the-GREAT-Time119BC-Greek-Coin-AEGIS-Nike-Gorgon-i14123/350937366974?pt=LH_DefaultDomain_0&hash=item51b57f41be)



Obv.: Head of Apollo r.

Rev.: AMI-ΣΟΥ. Tripod.

14 - GOD 3109 Ebay Comptoir des monnaies anciennes (Lille) 31691 (8.12 g; overstruck?)

[http://www.ebay.com/itm/Greek-coins-Pont-Amisos-Bronze-/190979203767?pt=LH\\_DefaultDomain\\_0&hash=item2c773f62b7](http://www.ebay.com/itm/Greek-coins-Pont-Amisos-Bronze-/190979203767?pt=LH_DefaultDomain_0&hash=item2c773f62b7)



Obv.: Head of Dionysos r.

Rev.: AMI-ΣΟΥ. Thyrus.

15 - GOD 3072 New York, ANS, 1944.100.41279 E.T. Newell (3.13 g; overstruck on 'Panthera/Cista?').



*Komana*

Obv.: Aegis.

Rev.: KOMA-NQN. Nike standing l., holding a branch.

16 - GOD 2965. Peus, list 39, May 1975, 201 (overstruck on undetermined type).



17 - GOD 3055. Münzen & Medaillen, 13, 9 Oct. 2003, 258 (6.65 g; overstruck on 'Ares/Sword?') = Münz Zentrum, 190, 11 March 2020, 238 (6.65 g, 21 mm) = Münz Zentrum, 142, 16 Sept. 2020, 142 (6.65 g, 21 mm).



Obv.: Dionysos.

Rev.: KOMA-NQN. Thrysos.

18 - GOD 3750. New York, ANS, 70.142.247 gift Stephens (3.82 g; overstruck on 'Perseus/Pilei').



19 - GOD 3223. New York, ANS, 1944.100.41396 E.T. Newell V 27 (3.60 g, 18 mm, 12 h; overstruck on 'Perseus/Pilei').



*Taulara*

Obv.: Head of Ares r.

Rev.: ΤΑΥΛΑΑ-ΡΩΝ. Sword.

20 - GOD 3525. Münzen & Medaillen, 13 (Sammlung J.-P. Righetti), 9 Oct. 2003, 279 (8.08 g, 20 mm) = Classical Numismatic Group, Electronic Auction, 215, 29 July 2009, 181 (8.08 g-1 h; from the J.-P. Righetti coll.; overstruck)

**Paphlagonia***Amastria*

Obv.: Aegis.

Rev.: ΑΜΑΣ-ΤΡΕΩΣ. Nike standing l., holding a branch.

21 - GOD 3101. Amasya Museum 78.2.20 (7.35 g, 21 mm, 12 h; overstruck on 'Ares/Sword' – see Ireland 2000, 1448).



22 - GOD 2987. Istanbul, Sadberk Hanım Museum 13107 = Sivas Hoard 680 (7.88 g, 21 mm, 12 h; overstruck on 'Ares/Sword').



23 - GOD 3083. Oxford, Ashmolean Museum 208 – Godwyn acq. (6.70 g, 12 h; overstruck on 'Ares/Sword').



24 - GOD 3569. Classical Numismatic Group, Electronic Auction 340, 3 December 2014, 146 (7.83 g, 12 h, 25 mm; overstruck on 'Ares/Sword' from Amisos).



*Sinope*

Obv.: Head of Ares

Rev. ΣΙΝΩ-ΠΙΗΣ (?). Sword.

25- GOD 3424. Schulten, 20-22 Oct. 1987, 172 (8.04 g; overstruck on Amastris [or Amisos, or double struck?]).



26- GOD 3701. Winterthur 2412 – from Rollin & Feuarent 1911 (8.11 g-23 mm-12 h; overstruck on “Apollo/Tripod?”).



Obv.: Head of Zeus r.  
Rev.: ΣΙΝΩΠΗΣ. Eagle on thunderbolt.

27- GOD 3125. London, BM, 1932-3-21-1 (7.73 g, 20 mm, 12 h; overstruck on ‘Ares/Sword’).



Obv.: Aegis.  
Rev.: ΣΙΝΩ-ΠΗΣ. Nike standing l., holding a branch.

28- GOD 3546. München 9 - tray III/84 (6.63 g; overstruck on ‘Ares/Sword?’).



## 2. Commentary

Bronze Mithradatic coins are known in vast quantities: 5,782 have been recorded for the Museum of Samsun<sup>6</sup>, 1,131 for the Museum of Amasya<sup>7</sup> and I have built a database coming from public and private collections which amounts to 2,404 additional coins. Nearly 10,000 coins are thus documented for these three sources alone<sup>8</sup>. Out of this gigantic material, only 28 are here recognized as overstruck. This makes a low ratio well under 1%, approximately one coin out of every 300 (28/9,317). Even taking into account the unrecognized overstrikes (because the undertype is no more visible), it is unlikely that more than 1% of the total amount was ever overstruck. We should wonder therefore why so.

These bronze mithradatic coins were issued by a bunch of nearly 15 mints among which Amisos stands by far as the most prolific one, with approximately three quarters of the full production<sup>9</sup>. At a considerable distance from Amisos, we find Sinope (c. 9%), Amastris (c. 6%), Komana (c. 3%) and the others. Does this distribution match with our little sample of overstrikes (Table 1)?

	Over.	%	Dbase	%
Amaseia	1	3.6	109	1.2
Amisos	14	50.0	6,953	74.6
Dia	-		54	0.6
Gazioura	-		53	0.6
Laodikeia	-		32	0.3
Kabira	-		142	1.5
Komana	4	14.3	257	2.8
Pharnakeia	-		91	1.0
Pimolisa	-		43	0.5
Taulara	1	3.6	31	0.3
Chabakta	-		146	1.6
Amastris	4	14.3	542	5.8
Sinope	4	14.3	864	9.3
Total	28	100.1	9,317	100.1

**Table 1. Distribution by mints of the 28 overstrikes and comparison with the total evidence (see CALLATAÿ 2010, p. 267)**

There is indeed a general similarity even if with discrepancies. With half of the evidence (14 cases out of 28), Amisos is less dominant than expected. Conversely, with 4 cases out of 28 (c. 14%), Amastris is here more attested. These

<sup>6</sup> OLSHAUSEN 2009.

<sup>7</sup> IRELAND 2000.

<sup>8</sup> See CALLATAÿ 2010, p. 263–272.

<sup>9</sup> But this high percentage is markedly lower for the Ashmolean Museum (60.4%: 110 coins out of 182 Pontic bronzes; see Ashton & Ireland 2007), the British Museum (51.1%: 113 coins out of 221; see PRICE 1993), and the Stancomb collection (50%: 40 coins out of 80; see STANCOMB 2000). On the 'new' mint of Sarbanissa, see IRELAND & COOK 2008.

discrepancies are unlikely to be relevant and are partly due to the fact that our 28 overstrikes are not evenly distributed among the various types of Mithradatic bronze coins (Table 2).

	Overstr.	%	Dbase	%
Head of Perseus/Pilei	-		181	2.0
Head of Dionysus/Cista	-		405	4.4
Head of Perseus/Pegasus	-		183	2.0
Head of Zeus/Eagle (c. 19.8g)	-		150	1.6
Head of Zeus/Eagle (c. 7.5g)	1	3.6	409	4.5
Head of Ares/Sword (c. 7.8g)	4	14.3	2,635	28.7
Head of Athena/Perseus (c. 19.0g)	4	14.3	571	6.2
Aegis/Nike (c. 7.6g)	16	57.1	4,653	50.6
Head of Dionysos/Thyrsus (c. 3.5g)	3	10.7	?	
Total	28	100.0	9,187	100.0

**Table 2. Distribution by types of the 28 overstrikes and comparison with the total evidence (see Callataï 2010, p. 267)**

Although a residual phenomenon in itself (c. 0.3%), overstrikes have only been applied on late issues. This does not come as a surprise since there were no large bronze issues circulating in Pontus before Eupator (see Sinope however) but considerably limits our chances to take advantage of these overstrikes to articulate the full sequence of issues. In particular, we do not have any case for the types “Head of Dionysus/Cista”, despite the large evidence of known coins (more than 400)<sup>10</sup>. The evidence could be summarized as such (Table 3).

Occurrences	Above type	Above mint	Undertype
1 (no. 27)	Head of Zeus/Eagle	Sinope	Head of Ares/Sword
	Head of Ares/Sword	Amasia, Amisos, Sinope	?
3 (no. 5--7)	Head of Athena/Perseus	Amisos	Head of Zeus/Eagle
17 (no. 1, 3, 9-14, 17-18, 21-25 and 28)	Aegis/Nike	Amisos, Amastris, Sinope	Head of Ares/Sword
1 (no. 16)	Head of Dionysus/Thyrsus	Amisos	Panthera/Cista
2 (no. 19-20)	Head of Dionysus/Thyrsus	Komana	Head of Perseus/Pilei
1 (no. 1)	Head of Apollo/Thunderbolt	Aemilion	Head of Zeus/Eagle

**Table 3. Summary of the recognized cases of overstrikes**

<sup>10</sup> See however IRELAND 2000 (Museum of Amasya), p. 25, no. 1058 (Amisos, but not illustrated).

We do have no less than 12 cases of “Aegis/Nike” clearly overstruck on “Ares/Sword”. We do have also a clear case of type “Head of Zeus/Eagle” on “Head of Ares/Sword”, with thus a supposed posteriority for that type “Head of Zeus/Eagle”, but – strangely enough – no overstrike of “Aegis/Nike” on “Head of Zeus”. Could it have been possible that type “Head of Zeus/Eagle”, massively found nowadays on the northern shores of the Black Sea, failed to really circulate in Pontus? Despite its richness (nearly 6,000 Mithradatic bronzes), the Museum of Samsun was nearly deprived of this type (only 26 coins for the heavy denomination and 12 for the light one)<sup>11</sup>.

Did these overstrikes have been applied in a very short period of time or could we imagine a more even scenario? As limited as it stands, this sample does not seem to offer any die-link between coins. But as we know that these Mithradatic bronzes issues were struck with vast quantities of dies (none of whom has so far received a die-study), it is hard to decide between compactness and sporadicness.

Perhaps the most important question is about the purpose of these overstrikes. Do they imply a change of nominal value with a higher purchasing power for the new type, as generally postulated for countermarks, or did they have been made for practical reason (to make up the difference when the mint master was run out of metal) as demonstrated for silver?<sup>12</sup> In any case, it cannot have been for political reasons, as a kind of *damnatio memoriae*, or just to strike coins with legal tender reusing foreign coins as blanks, since Pontic overstrikes were applied on Pontic coins. Even more puzzling: the best documented case of overstrikes is for two types which circulated together (a point favouring the practical reason). Indeed, types “Aegis/Nike” and “Ares/Sword” are found together not only on Northern shores of the Black Sea (1: IGCH 1144 [1897, Kerch]; 2: Poljanka [1984]) but also in Pontus (1: CH III 76 [Pontus]<sup>13</sup>; 2: Başköy 1959<sup>14</sup>; 3: CH IX 519 [before 1990, Samsun])<sup>15</sup>.

There is also evidence that, at a certain point in Pontus, all the issues struck before the types “Head of Athena/Standing Perseus” (for the large denomination) and “Aegis/Nike” (for the small one) stopped to circulate (see 1: CH IX 559 [1981, Binbaşıoğlu, Zela, Tokat]<sup>16</sup>; 2: CH IX 542 [before 1996, Sivas]<sup>17</sup>; 3: Simenli)<sup>18</sup>.

The recovery of Pontic bronzes with the types “Aegis/Nike” along the great deposit of bronze sculptures in a Piraeus building which is likely to have collapsed at the moment of the sack by Roman troops in spring 86 BC provides a precious *terminus ante quem* for this issue. But it is hard to decide when to date the demonetization of the type “Head of Ares/Sword”.

<sup>11</sup> CALLATAÏ 2010, p. 267.

<sup>12</sup> See CALLATAÏ 2018.

<sup>13</sup> BAUER & MAYER 1998.

<sup>14</sup> GÖKTÜRK & CEBESÖY 1993.

<sup>15</sup> TRAVAGLINI 1997.

<sup>16</sup> AMANDRY *et alii* 1991.

<sup>17</sup> TEKIN 1998.

<sup>18</sup> KELES 2009.

An important additional piece for the understanding of what happened is provided by a rare issue of the type “Head of Ares/Sword” with the letters IB (only struck at the mint of Amisos and only known for that type) (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Bronze coin struck at Amisos (type “Head of Ares/Sword”) with the letters IB (Rauch, sale 95, 30 Sept. 2014, no. 100 [8.49g] © Coinarchives.com).

We know several varieties “Head of Ares/Sword” with these letters. All of them are associated with the so-called “Pontic emblems”: a crescent and an eight-rays star. The weights of these varieties with IB look also a bit higher than for the other varieties of the type “Head of Ares/Sword”. Here are the numbers coming from the unpublished database I built for my PhD<sup>19</sup>.

Weight	With IB	Without ☾☽
9.20-39g	x	
9.00-19g	xx	x
8.80-99g	xxx	xxxxxx
8.60-79g	x	xxxx
8.40-59g	xxx	xxxxx
8.20-39g	x	xxxxxxxxx
8.00-19g	xxxxxxx	xxxxxxxxxxxxxx
7.80-99g	xxxx	xxxxxxxxxxxx
7.60-79g	xxx	xxxxxxxxxxxxxx
7.40-59g	xx	xxxxxx
7.20-39g	xx	xxxxxxx
7.00-19g	-	x
6.80-99g	-	xxxx
Number	29	81
Median	8.14g	7.97g

Table 4. Weights of the coins “Head of Ares/Sword” struck at Amisos

<sup>19</sup> CALLATAÏ 1988, 1B. *Les monnaies : documents*, p. 59–60 and 100.

The best guess we can make is that these letters are a mark of value for twelve. And, if such, they must refer to 12 chalkoi, which is three times the value usually given by modern authors to this bronze denomination of ca. 8g (tetrachalkoi). Therefore, the very existence of these Pontic bronze coins with the letters IB is a strong warning about the possibility of an over-evaluated legal tender. It does not tell us what was the value of the coins with “Aegis/Nike” (was it 4, 8, 12 or more chalkoi?) but it leaves open the possibility that they were counted as more than 4 chalkoi.

Considering the remarkable disappearance at a certain moment of the coins with type “Head of Ares/Sword” (hoards) and the abundance of the type “Aegis/Nike” (hundreds of dies), it may well affect the general view we may have about the Mithradatic coin production in terms of monetary mass. Suppose that coins “Aegis/Nike” have been valued a quarter of a drachm each (in a system with six obols per drachm and 8 chalkoi per obol), then the striking of say 1,000 obverse dies with say 10,000 coins as an average for each makes a total value of 2.5 million drachms, which makes 417 talents or the equivalent of ca. 30 obverse dies for silver tetradrachms (with a higher average of 20,000 coins per obverse die), that is a quarter of the full production for silver. If such is the case, bronze coin issues may well have played a significant role in the general pattern of monetary actions undertaken by Eupator.

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