

ANTENOR QUADERNI 46

ANTHROPOLOGY OF FORGERY

A MULTIDISCIPLINARY
APPROACH TO THE STUDY
OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL FAKES

PADOVA
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PADOVA UNIVERSITY PRESS

ANTENOR QUADERNI

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Università degli Studi di Padova

Dipartimento dei Beni Culturali: Archeologia, Storia dell'Arte, del Cinema e della Musica

Piazza Capitaniato, 7 – 35139 Padova

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ISBN 978-88-6938-154-6

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Università degli Studi di Padova

via 8 Febbraio 2, Padova

www.padovauniversitypress.it

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In copertina: Collezione Marchetti inv. 346. *Lebes gamikos*. Fotografia e composizione Elisa Bernard.

UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI PADOVA
DIPARTIMENTO DEI BENI CULTURALI

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OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL FAKES

Edited by
Monica Baggio, Elisa Bernard, Monica Salvadori, Luca Zamparo

Volume realizzato con il contributo di



UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI
DI PADOVA



PROGETTO
MEMO

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Fondazione
Cassa di Risparmio di Padova e Rovigo

Nell'ambito del Bando

PROGETTI DI
eccellenza 2017



INTESA  SANPAOLO

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THE IMPACT OF MODERN FAKES IN THE ANALYSIS OF MONETARY CIRCULATION: A CASE STUDY FROM AQUILEIA*

Andrea Stella

ABSTRACT

This contribution tackles the presence of modern forgeries of Apollonia Pontica coins in the collection of the National Museum of Aquileia. As demonstrated by the die link analysis, these specimens bear close resemblances to the Apollonia Pontica forgeries featured in the famous Black Sea hoard. Furthermore, no evidence is known for finds of genuine coins of this mint in the area of Aquileia, as this coinage was primarily conceived for circulation along the western shore of the Black Sea. As a matter of fact, these numismatic fakes were deliberately purchased to meet the demand of the black market of ancient artifacts in Aquileia. After some seizures undertaken to strike down this illicit trade, they became part of the numismatic collection housed in the local National Museum. In this way, these numismatic fakes could alter the picture of the local monetary circulation in ancient times and, therefore, they need to be detected and then isolated within the archaeological collection of coin finds recovered in Aquileia.

KEYWORDS: Aquileia; Apollonia Pontica; diobols; numismatic fakes; monetary circulation; coin finds.

THE NUMISMATIC COLLECTION IN THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AQUILEIA

Aquileia is the greatest among the Roman sites in Northern Italy¹. Founded in 181 BC as a Latin colony, it later became the capital of the Augustan *Venetia et Histria*, also thanks to its growing importance as a central node for the trade routes between the Eastern Mediterranean Sea and the Danubian *limes*. The city still flourished during the Late Roman period, before starting its decline by the middle of the 5th century AD, when its key role was lost in favor of the new capital Ravenna. Since the name of Aquileia almost disappeared from written sources after the siege laid by Attila in 452 AD, historians considered the city abandoned for a long time. Now, thanks to new evidence provided by archaeology, it is possible to trace the life in this site through the Medieval time².

As no modern great town covered the ancient city and given the absolute prominence of the site in antiquity, Aquileia became a goldmine of archaeological artifacts. An impressive bulk of finds has been recovered over decades of investigations, which were regularly carried on since the 19th century³. Among these finds, there are, evidently, several coins. Indeed, the National Archaeological Museum in Aquileia features one of the greatest archaeological collections of Roman coins in Italy (and beyond); within the collection, every single specimen originated from the area of the ancient

* I would like to thank prof. Monica Salvadori for allowing me to publish this paper in this volume.

¹ For a recent summary on many archaeological and historical aspects regarding Aquileia, see Moenibus et portu celeberrima 2009.

² See VILLA 2004 for the archaeological evidence on the Early Medieval period in Aquileia.

³ For the history of archaeological investigations in Aquileia, see GIOVANNINI, MASELLI SCOTTI 2009 with further bibliography.

city and its environs⁴. Unfortunately, the abundance of archaeological artifacts gave also birth to a local illegal trade of antiquities⁵. Coins were particularly affected, and they have been illegally recovered and sold in great quantities. To strike down this black market, several judicial seizures have been conducted against those detaining archaeological artifacts without permission. Therefore, a stream of ancient objects of illegal provenance entered the local museum and was stored in its rooms. This is how modern fakes, particularly coins, became accidentally part of the collection as well.

THE BLACK SEA HOARD OF APOLLONIA PONTICA FORGERIES

I will tackle a particular case study, which represents a good example of how modern numismatic fakes can alter the picture of an archaeological collection. The subject is an assemblage of modern forgeries of coins struck in Apollonia Pontica, a Greek colony on the Black Sea, attested among some private collections in Aquileia. During the 4th century BC, a large issue of silver diobols took place in this mint (*fig. 1*)⁶. These issues are distinguished by an anchor and a crayfish, as well as the letter A on the reverse (the canonical typology for this mint) and by the *gorgoneion* on the obverse (this one as a result of the influence of Athens in this area during the 5th century BC)⁷. As demonstrated by hoards, diobols from Apollonia Pontica circulated over a large area, *i.e.* the entire western shore of the Black Sea, together with the same denominations struck by the Greek colony of Mesembria⁸. One of these mixed treasures was recovered in 1988 by a Bulgarian lifeguard who commissioned to a counterfeiter the production of more than 1000 forgeries struck from at least 15 false dies designed according to the ancient coins available⁹. Later, he gathered an entire hoard of fake diobols from Apollonia and Mesembria and buried it under seawater for a week before selling. This is the reason why this assemblage is known as the Black Sea hoard. Fake coins featured in this treasure were produced



Fig. 1 – Gorny & Mosch Giessener Münzhandlung, Auction 147/2006, lot n. 1266. A genuine diobol struck in Apollonia Pontica, c. 350-300 BC (SNG *BM* 167-76). Out full scale.

from modern dies with hot flans and hammer, so in a very deceptive style. A single workshop identified as “Varna 1” was responsible for this production¹⁰. Subsequently dies were sold, sometimes recut, and a new generation of 3000-6000 estimated forgeries were produced by hydraulic pressing on cold flans, thus showing a lower style. A huge amount of Apollonia Pontica fakes spread over the numismatic market during the nineties and before extensive condemnation and withdrawal, some specimens were still available in 2002 on web auctions¹¹. At first, these counter-

⁴ Even if the work of recording has been undertaken by the end of the '70s, the collection still remains largely unpublished. A first overview is found in GORINI 1979; GORINI 1980; GORINI 1984; GORINI 1987. The real amount of coins kept in the coin cabinet is still unknown, but an inventory list dated to 1919/20 already shows more than 40.000 pieces. Since the entire assemblage of finds from the 20th-21st centuries is largely unrecorded, a total number of 80.000/100.000 coins is to be expected.

⁵ BERTACCHI 1993, p. 237.

⁶ Type SNG *BM* The Black Sea, 167-176. See KARAYOTOV 2007 for an exhaustive summary on the coinage of Apollonia Pontica, in particular pp. 134-135 for the coins mentioned here.

⁷ KARAYOTOV 2007, pp. 129-131.

⁸ See *Id.*, pp. 134-135; 138-139 for a detailed list of hoards.

⁹ Details about the Black Sea hoard have been drawn from SAYLES 2007, pp. 80-83; see also http://snible.org/coins/black_sea_hoard.html. See also <http://medusacoins.reidgold.com/newyork.html> for a second hoard of Apollonia forgeries that appeared in 1999 at the New York International Numismatic Convention.

¹⁰ PROKOPOV, MANOV 2005, p. 16.

¹¹ From a quick look at auction catalogues, some specimens seem to be still offered in auctions at the present time. See for instance Hemporium Hamburg, auction 74/2015, lot n. 51; auction 76/2016, lot n. 42. For further examples, including possible coins made from recut dies belonging to the Black Sea hoard, see <https://www.acsearch.info>.

feits deceived many coin dealers, who argued in favor of their authenticity also recurring to chemical analysis. Eventually, authenticity was demonstrated thanks to die link evidence with certified replicas. As discussed below, a few of these forgeries reached also the local market of antiquities in Aquileia and consequently the museum collection.

FORGERIES OF APOLLONIA PONTICA COINS IN AQUILEIA

I first came across two Apollonia diobols in a private collection in 2012. A few years before, Luisa Bertacchi, former keeper of the National Museum of Aquileia, had published 5 specimens in her work about the possible presence of an Etruscan harbor on the river Corno; the work was based on an assemblage of archaeological artifacts that had been delivered to her house by an anonymous donor¹². Bertacchi also cited a former seizure of further 11 coins, now kept in the local museum¹³. At a first glance, all the available documentation for this coinage in Aquileia has no proper archaeological provenance. On the other hand, no evidence is known from the historical collection of the 19th-20th centuries or from more recent finds. If, on the one hand, the suspicious origin alone raises some doubts, on the other hand, the die analysis is decisive in condemning all Apollonia coins from Aquileia as modern fakes. Picture 2 shows some examples of die matching between forgeries from the Black Sea hoard and a few of those coins attested in Aquileia (fig. 2). The last ones clearly belong to the first generation of forgeries made according to the ancient technology and displaying a higher style. A further element for recognizing coin n. 5 as a fake is the reversed letter A, possibly a mistake made by the modern die engraver¹⁴. On the same specimen, the style of the crayfish is also unusual, along with the rough attempt to reproduce moneyer's letters sometimes attested on genuine coins (fig. 3)¹⁵. In general, forgeries from the Black Sea hoard form a clear stylistic group, which is well recognizable from the authentic pieces. All the Apollonia diobols from Aquileia fit perfectly within this group.

Nonetheless, the detection of these modern fakes is also possible on the grounds of numismatic and historical considerations. The presence of Greek coins in Aquileia before and after the foundation of the Latin colony is a well-defined aspect of the local monetary circulation¹⁶. Southern Italy and

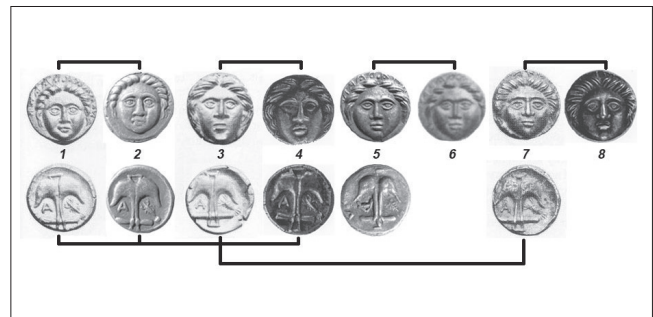


Fig. 2 — Examples of die matching between modern forgeries from the Black Sea hoard (ns. 1, 3, 6-7), from a private collection in Aquileia (ns. 2, 5) and those pictured in BERTACCHI 2009 (ns. 4, 8) (photo credits: ns. 1, 3, 7 <https://www.cointalk.com/threads/diobol-of-apollonia-pontica.280094/>; n. 6 http://snible.org/coins/black_sea_hoard.html; ns. 2, 5 Aquileia, private collection; ns. 4, 8 BERTACCHI 2009, pp. 58, 60).



Fig. 3 — Gorny & Mosch Giessener Münzhandlung, Auction 147/2006, lot n. 1267. A genuine diobol struck in Apollonia Pontica bearing moneyer's letters, c. 350-300 BC (SNG *BM* 174). Out full scale.

¹² BERTACCHI 2009, cat. ns. 25-30.

¹³ *Ead.*, p. 56. So far it was not possible to recognize these coins among those kept in the local coin cabinet.

¹⁴ For a specimen with the same anomaly, see http://snible.org/coins/black_sea_hoard.html.

¹⁵ See KARAYOTOV 2007, p. 134 for moneyer names on genuine coins of Apollonia Pontica.

¹⁶ A detailed overview concerning finds of Greek coins from Aquileia in GORINI 1979, pp. 414-415; GORINI 1980, pp. 699-700; GORINI 1984, pp. 291-293, 295. See also GORINI 2016a.

Illiricum are responsible for the majority of records, thus producing a clear pattern. This evidence is closely-related to the trade routes heading to the newly-established colony during the Republican age, as confirmed by other archaeological finds such as pottery¹⁷. A large documentation of Apollonia coins of uncertain archaeological origin constitutes an anomaly and, thus, it has no real link with the ancient monetary circulation of Aquileia. Furthermore, according to hoard finds, this coinage had a prominent role only on the western shore of the Black Sea. It follows that the discovery of a large treasure of these coins in Aquileia, as a means to explain such a considerable assemblage, would be most unlikely, if not to be excluded completely.

NUMISMATIC FAKES FOR THE BLACK MARKET OF ANTIQUITIES IN AQUILEIA?

In the light of all this evidence, the only way to explain this presence is that Apollonia modern fakes had been purchased on the international numismatic market in great quantities, in order to meet the local demand for archaeological artifacts. Despite the abundance of finds of ancient coins, by the Nineties the number of available specimens was probably no longer adequate to meet the local demand, thus causing the need to introduce materials coming from abroad. It is a matter of conjecture whether the forgeries were intentionally bought in stock or if they misled the buyer themselves. At the same time, it is only hypothetical claiming that these coins were later sold to inexperienced collectors as if they had been struck in Aquileia itself, given the presence of the letter A and of the anchor, which possibly recalled the famous harbor on the river Natiso and the maritime trades which had made the city famous in Roman times. Nonetheless, this could explain the high and anomalous number of Apollonia forgeries attested in Aquileia. The way in which they subsequently entered the museum collection, in some cases, is that of seizures. Especially during the Sixties and the Seventies, a great quantity of archaeological artifacts came to light after agricultural works employing the newly introduced mechanical ploughing¹⁸. Some of these finds were regularly consigned to and purchased by the museum, but others entered the local illegal market of antiquities or were directly sold abroad. Furthermore, the same period saw the introduction of the first metal detectors, which led to the discovery of a great amount of coins, sometimes entire hoards, with the aim of selling. The effort of the Cultural Heritage Office to prosecute this illicit trade resulted in several seizures of materials of local provenance, which subsequently took the way of the museum for safekeeping; this is the case of the 11 Apollonia coins mentioned above. So, those modern fake coins, previously included in private collections, shared the same fate of the ancient artifacts becoming part of the official collection kept in the National Museum¹⁹. It is now possible to detect these forgeries and to distinguish them from the genuine finds of local provenance.

CONCLUSIONS

The case study discussed here is a good example for highlighting the importance of detecting fakes for academic archaeology and numismatics. In fact, this skill belongs not only to auctioneers or dealers, for whom identifying forgeries is a central matter in their daily work. As shown above, fakes can badly affect archaeological collections chiefly made of artifacts coming from a given site. It follows that any scientific analysis drawn from such a data set could produce a wrong picture of the ancient circulation of artifacts, such as, in this circumstance, coins. The case of fake Apollonia diobols from the Black Sea hoard attested in Aquileia is the best example to understand this issue. No evidence for this coinage is known among the ancient Greek coins attested in this site, but a large

¹⁷ MASELLI SCOTTI 2009, p. 6. A role of the new settlers coming from Central Italy is not to be excluded as well.

¹⁸ BERTACCHI 1993, p. 238; see also GORINI 2016b, p. 201.

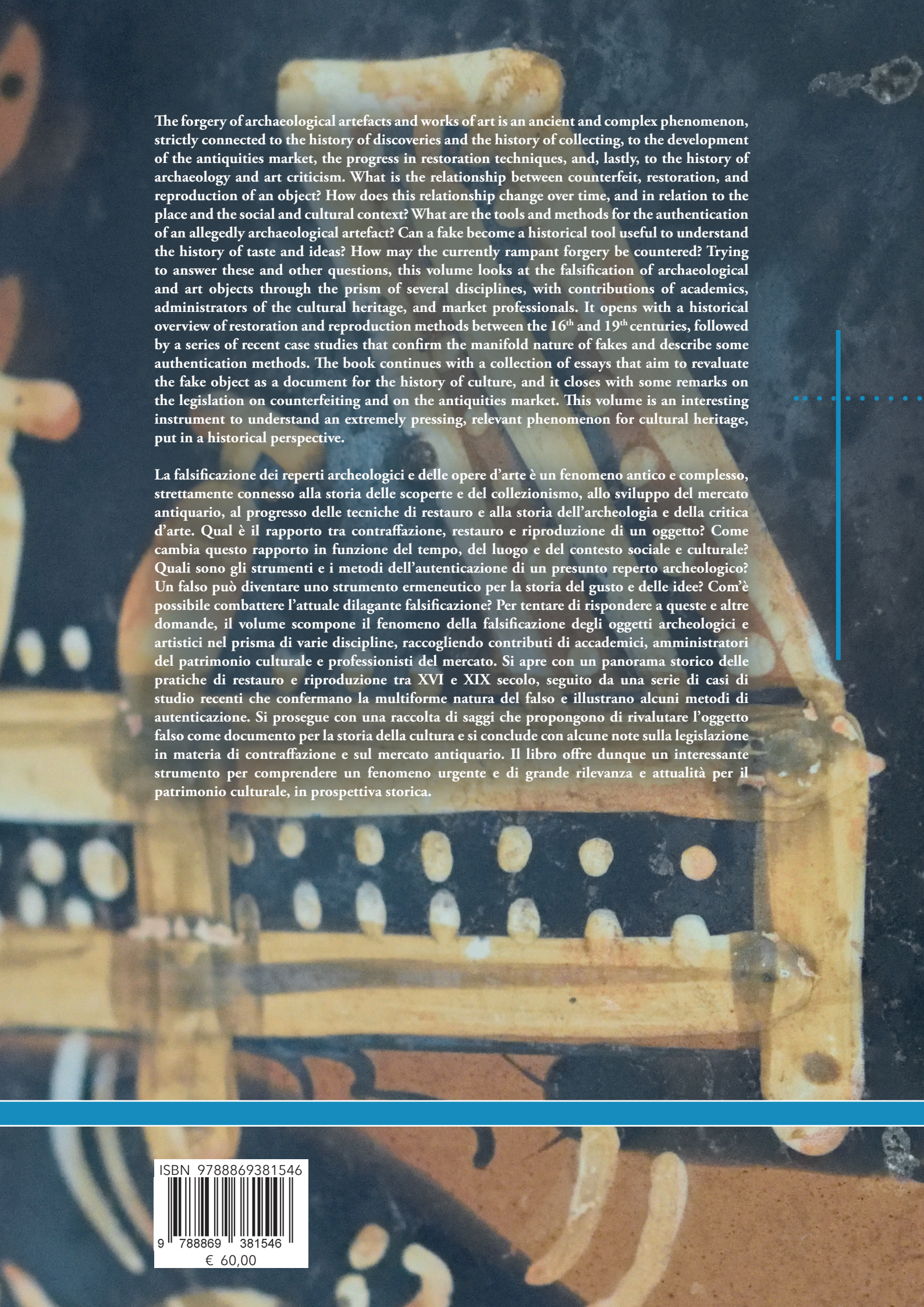
¹⁹ See also the case of a modern replica of a cistophorus struck under Augustus included into a small assemblage of genuine coins illegally detained and seized; for this coin, see STELLA 2017, n. 13.

number occurred in private collections and converged to the local museum in contemporary times. The die linkage evidence has been decisive to detect these forgeries and to prevent coins that never reached Aquileia in antiquity from being considered in the study of the local monetary circulation. Therefore, a good knowledge of how to deal with forgeries and how to detect them is an essential expertise, to be gained by anyone involved in scientific studies related to numismatics (and not only). This has been, hopefully, demonstrated in this paper.

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The forgery of archaeological artefacts and works of art is an ancient and complex phenomenon, strictly connected to the history of discoveries and the history of collecting, to the development of the antiquities market, the progress in restoration techniques, and, lastly, to the history of archaeology and art criticism. What is the relationship between counterfeit, restoration, and reproduction of an object? How does this relationship change over time, and in relation to the place and the social and cultural context? What are the tools and methods for the authentication of an allegedly archaeological artefact? Can a fake become a historical tool useful to understand the history of taste and ideas? How may the currently rampant forgery be countered? Trying to answer these and other questions, this volume looks at the falsification of archaeological and art objects through the prism of several disciplines, with contributions of academics, administrators of the cultural heritage, and market professionals. It opens with a historical overview of restoration and reproduction methods between the 16th and 19th centuries, followed by a series of recent case studies that confirm the manifold nature of fakes and describe some authentication methods. The book continues with a collection of essays that aim to reevaluate the fake object as a document for the history of culture, and it closes with some remarks on the legislation on counterfeiting and on the antiquities market. This volume is an interesting instrument to understand an extremely pressing, relevant phenomenon for cultural heritage, put in a historical perspective.

La falsificazione dei reperti archeologici e delle opere d'arte è un fenomeno antico e complesso, strettamente connesso alla storia delle scoperte e del collezionismo, allo sviluppo del mercato antiquario, al progresso delle tecniche di restauro e alla storia dell'archeologia e della critica d'arte. Qual è il rapporto tra contraffazione, restauro e riproduzione di un oggetto? Come cambia questo rapporto in funzione del tempo, del luogo e del contesto sociale e culturale? Quali sono gli strumenti e i metodi dell'autenticazione di un presunto reperto archeologico? Un falso può diventare uno strumento ermeneutico per la storia del gusto e delle idee? Com'è possibile combattere l'attuale dilagante falsificazione? Per tentare di rispondere a queste e altre domande, il volume scompone il fenomeno della falsificazione degli oggetti archeologici e artistici nel prisma di varie discipline, raccogliendo contributi di accademici, amministratori del patrimonio culturale e professionisti del mercato. Si apre con un panorama storico delle pratiche di restauro e riproduzione tra XVI e XIX secolo, seguito da una serie di casi di studio recenti che confermano la multiforme natura del falso e illustrano alcuni metodi di autenticazione. Si prosegue con una raccolta di saggi che propongono di rivalutare l'oggetto falso come documento per la storia della cultura e si conclude con alcune note sulla legislazione in materia di contraffazione e sul mercato antiquario. Il libro offre dunque un interessante strumento per comprendere un fenomeno urgente e di grande rilevanza e attualità per il patrimonio culturale, in prospettiva storica.

ISBN 9788869381546



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€ 60,00