

NÉCROLOGIES / OBITUARIES

ERNEST OBERLÄNDER-TÂRNOVEANU

OCTAVIAN ILIESCU (1919–2009)



Octavian Iliescu was born on 22nd August 1919, in Craiova (Romania), into the family of a magistrate. He was the first of three children, being followed by a sister and a brother. He received his primary and secondary education at Bals and Craiova, where he graduated with excellent results at the National College «Charles I». Before WWII, as nowadays, this highschool was the most prestigious within the region of Oltenia (SE Romania).

In 1938, he enrolled at the Faculty of Law at the University of Bucharest, from which he graduated in 1942. He was then enlisted in the army for two years, until the autumn of 1944, first at the school for the reservist officers and then serving with various military units within the country.

Returning to civilian life, Octavian Iliescu decided to pursue a career as a lawyer, and to read for the Bar of Ilfov and Bucharest. This was but a very short activity, being cut off by the policy of the Romanian Communist Party. According to the practice of the time, in 1950 he was removed from the Bar Association under the pretext of «reducing» the number of jurists, who had become surplus in a regime based on the open violation of any written or

common law. For a while he was employed at the Sanitation Office in Bucharest taking care of the maintenance of lakes in Bucharest. Later he was promoted to technician in the same department. Deprived of the opportunity to practise in the field of law, for which he was trained, Octavian Iliescu was forced to choose a new path in life, that of history.

The year 1951 represented a turning point in his personal and professional life. Octavian Iliescu was employed, step by step, as an outside collaborator, then as second assistant and, ultimately, as a researcher at the Institute of History of the People's Republic of Romania in Bucharest. His election as a member of this prestigious institute was well deserved. Already in the early 1950s, the young Octavian Iliescu was known and recognized in the world of history owing to his articles on ancient and early Romanian medieval numismatics. He was regarded not only as a good scholar of Romanian medieval numismatics, but also as a person with solid knowledge of history. At the Institute of History he began an exceptional scholarly career during which his extensive knowledge not only of numismatics, but also economics, politics and the history of ideas were put to fruition. This brought him to the forefront of numismatics and made him known and appreciated both at home and abroad.

From 1953 to 1954 he was employed by the State Bank of the People's Republic of Romania, and after its dissolution, at the Numismatic Cabinet of the Romanian Academy Library (1954–1978). Here, until 1958, he collaborated with Professor Constantin Moisil, whom he already knew from his student days. Octavian Iliescu spent time in the Numismatic Cabinet during his student years and was given access to the collections. In addition, in the years 1942–1944, whenever he came to Bucharest, he attended the meetings of the Romanian Numismatic Society, delivered papers and took part in discussions.

For two decades, between 1959 and 1978, Octavian Iliescu was the Head of the Numismatic Library of the Romanian Academy, contributing to the enrichment of the collections as well as to the organization and scientific improvement of the numismatic treasures in this famous institution. His intense activity in publication, together with his competence and his openness and generous character made him known and appreciated not only among archaeologists, historians and museum curators in Romania, but also among foreign researchers. Famous numismatists such as Tommaso Bertelè, David M. Metcalf, Philip Grierson, Cécile Morrisson, Todor Gerasimov, Sergije Dimitrijevi, Karel Kastellin, and Lajos Huszár as well as the historians Geo Pistarino and Michel Balard, to mention just a few, had a long time correspondence with Octavian Iliescu, exchanging ideas and publications, in spite of the bureaucratic barriers of the «Iron Curtain» or visceral suspicions manifested by the communist regime against any kind of contact with «foreigners», including those coming from the «brotherly» states.

Octavian Iliescu spent the last years of his «institutional» career at the National Museum of Romania, where he contributed to its opening in 1968–1971. He retired in 1982.

After 1990, he was re-employed as a researcher at the Institute of History «Nicolae Iorga» of the Romanian Academy, the same place where he started his career almost 40 years before! For him, to work at the Institute of History was not only a great joy, but also moral reparation for the humiliations and injustices he suffered after 1978.

His contacts with numismatics began early, at the age of nine, when he laid the foundations of a coin collection which he would enrich for the next seven decades. His interest in old coins brought him into contact with the well known numismatists in Craiova at that time: Dr. Aurel Metzulescu, Constantin S. Nicolaescu-Plopsor, Luigi Gattorno, but also with the most important numismatists and coin collectors in Romania: Prof. Constantin Moisil, Dr. George Severeanu, Corneliu Secaseanu, Dr. Heinrich Bursztyn, Mrs. Mina Paucker, Octavian Luchian, Ilie Tabrea, and Irimia Damian. Among these, Aurel Metzulescu and Constantin S. Nicolaescu-Plopsor were his first mentors who decisively influenced his future career, and later, Constantin Moisil, whom Octavian Iliescu succeeded as the Head of the Numismatic Cabinet in 1958.

On December 4th 1938 Octavian Iliescu became member of the Romanian Numismatic Society in which he was active for 60 years until 1998.

In December 2008, in recognition of an exceptional professional life and his dedication to the Numismatic Society, Octavian Iliescu was made President of Honour of the Romanian Numismatic Society.

His first little article on numismatics was published in 1940, when he was 19 years old. He subsequently published nearly 900 studies, articles, notes, and reviews as well as a few volumes.

Octavian Iliescu's scientific interests covered the entire spectrum of numismatics, from the early issues (Greek, Dacian and Celtic, Roman, Byzantine) to the Romanian, Balkan and western medieval coinages, as well as Islamic, up to modern and contemporary numismatics. At the same time, his research extended to medals and also some related areas, such as heraldry, sigillography, metrology and glyptics.

Without a doubt, his favourite area of research was that of Romanian medieval numismatics (Moldavia, Wallachia and Dobrudja). In this vast field Octavian Iliescu continued, expanded and, especially, modernized the studies initiated about 140 years earlier by Sturdza, Docan, Severeanu and Moisil. He brought them closer to the level achieved by European scientific investiga-

tions in the 20th century. A simple look at his bibliography is enough to understand how many innovations Octavian Iliescu made to the research of monetary production and circulation in the Romanian area.

Octavian Iliescu sought to reveal the general evolution of the Romanian monetary system during the 14th–15th centuries, the organisation of monetary production and distribution, as well as the mints throughout the Principality of Wallachia. As early as 1956 he proposed a rigorous system of classification of the Wallachian issues, based on periodic changes of monetary types and marks used in the workshops of this country for the control of monetary production. The principles on which this classification is based are still valid today and can serve as a basis for discussion for new ones.

In 1956, he published a small monograph on the coin issues of Vladislav I. This book was followed by others dedicated to the coins of Laiota Basarab (1975), Vlad I (1988) and, recently, a volume dedicated to the mint of Mircea the Elder (2008). The latest book is the only comprehensive synthesis on the monetary activity of this Romanian prince.

As we review the numismatic work of Octavian Iliescu, we must mention here some of his studies on the political organization of the Romanian countries in the 14th–15th centuries. Such are those relating to the joint reigns, or those covering the economic and financial restoration in the times of Basarab I, Vladislav I and Peter I. Another series of contributions has analysed the development of a monetary economy on Romanian territory in the 14th–17th centuries.

We are also indebted to Octavian Iliescu for the two modern syntheses of the evolution of the monetary phenomenon on Romanian territory from the 14th century to 1867 (the 1st edition published 1964, the 2nd edition in 1997 and another volume in 1970).

Octavian Iliescu was a pioneer in the study of the Dobruja's medieval mint. He was the first to identify the issues of the Christian political parties in Northern Dobruja, liege to the Golden Horde, and the existence of local monetary systems in the main trade centres on the Danube, such as Chilia and Licostomo, during the second half of the 15th century.

Another area of numismatics where Octavian Iliescu played a fundamental role is that focused on Eastern mints. Previously, only one Romanian contribution can be mentioned, namely the Ottoman coins in the hoard from Țițești, published by Constantin Moisil in 1916. Octavian Iliescu established the research on the coins of the Golden Horde not only in Romania but also in South-East Europe. Even today the publication of the hoard from Oțeleni (1964) is a model of how one should study such finds of high historical value, presenting palaeographic difficulties.

The same Octavian Iliescu published the first Indian gold coin to be found not only on Romanian territory but also in Central and South-East Europe. The coin is an issue of the Delhi Sultanate found in the hoard from Brăiești (Botoșani). At present, the coin is the most westerly find of its kind on European territory.

Of high interest are also the works of Octavian Iliescu on Central and Western European medieval mints. In 1943 he published the first hoard of denarii of the Friesach type found south of the Carpathians, the Filiași hoard (Dolj). The hoard consisted of coins issued in Styria, Carinthia, Austria, Cologne and England in the 12th–13th centuries. It was buried during the Mongol invasion of 1241–1242.

In the 1970s he published two important contributions on Genovese and Venetian coin finds in Romania. The conclusions were fundamental for the understanding of the impact of the international trade on the Black Sea and the Danube upon the economic, political and cultural Romanian society in the 13th–15th centuries. The historical significance of Octavian Iliescu's works on the Genovese colonial mint goes far beyond local and regional importance and is a major contribution to Late Medieval European numismatics.

Octavian Iliescu also carried out research in archaeology and published a large number of gold treasures from the Bronze Age in Romania such as those from Persinari (Dâmbovită County), Sacoșu Mare (Timiș County) and Căuaș (Satu Mare County). The wonderful treasure of swords and daggers from Persinari was published in more than one study in Romania and abroad.

Apart from his hundreds of works, studies, articles, and notes on numismatics, medals, sigillography, heraldry, metrology, glyptics, archaeology, economic and socio-political history, and historical geography, Octavian Iliescu also delivered over 300 scientific lectures in Romania and abroad.

For many decades, Octavian Iliescu was a member of the editorial board of such prestigious journals as: *Studii și Cercetări Numismatice*, *Buletinul Societății Numismatice Române*, *Cercetări Numismatice* and was the editor of the volume *La numismatique, source de l'histoire de l'art et de l'histoire des idées. Travaux présentées au XV^e Congrès International des Sciences Historiques, Bucaresti, 11 août 1980, avec une préface de R. A. G. Carson* (Bucharest, 1981).

In recognition of his rich scientific activity, Octavian Iliescu was elected member of the International Committee of the Medal (1968–1977) and council member of the International Numismatic Commission (1973–1986). From 1991 he was an honorary member of the same Commission, the only Romanian to hold this position so far. He was an honorary member of the Royal Numismatic Society (London, 1977) and corresponding member of the Ameri-

can Numismatic Society (New York, 1989). Octavian Iliescu was also member of the Society of Oriental Studies (1960); founder member of the Society for Byzantine Studies (1984); member of the Society for Classical Studies (1970) and member of the Association of Scientists (1989). In 2003 he was decorated with the Order for Cultural Merit in rank of Officer.

Octavian Iliescu was always a friendly and generous person. Famous scholars or amateurs, young or old people, all freely received his advice and help. In the period when he was director of the Numismatic Cabinet of the Romanian Academy Library this place was an oasis where you could consult the reference books and gain access to the collection.

Despite the fact that he never taught, through his works, lectures and discussions with young (and not so young) researchers Octavian Iliescu established a true Romanian school of numismatics.

The passing of Octavian Iliescu ends an era not only for Romanian but also for European numismatics. It was the era of the great scholars with an encyclopaedic spirit, those who decisively made numismatics one of the most important sources for history.