

GREAT NUMISMATISTS

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IOANNIS NICOLAS SVORONOS

(Mykonos, 15/IV/1863 – Athens, 8/IX/1922)



Ioannis Nicolas Svoronos was a most remarkable and significant scholar of his time and ours. It is unimaginable to the present writer that a numismatist today in a relatively short life span could leave such a fundamental

and comprehensive *œuvre* on four of the major coinages of ancient Greece: those of Crete, Athens, the Ptolemies and Macedonia. These works remain indispensable and irreplaceable.^[1]

Svoronos was born on the island Mykonos on 15 April 1863 from a family of the merchant marine on both sides that dealt with the trade of wheat between Russia and Greece. They moved to Piraeus to improve business, but the death of the father Nicolas Svoronos in 1871 forced them to return to Mykonos. The young Ioannis showed interest in archaeology from a very young age. His teacher often had to send him in detention because of his rambunctious nature. He soon discovered that his pupil busied himself trying to read and decipher the inscriptions of Delos housed in the room where he was confined that served as small museum and library. That was Svoronos's first encounter with a discipline that would become his life-long passion. On the good teacher's advice Ioannis in 1874 was sent to his uncle in Piraeus to attend high school. When he graduated in 1878 his teachers recommended that Svoronos pursued his vocation for archaeology. The family, however, in a difficult financial situation, insisted that Ioannis studied law. The young student complied and in addition attended archaeology classes, often walking from Piraeus to Athens in order to save money to buy archaeology books.

I.N. Svoronos's life took a turn when his relative, the influential collector of antiquities and medals Alexander Meletopoulos, realized the talents and passion of the young man and recommended him to the Prime Minister of Greece Charilaos Trikoupis who sent him to Achilleas Postolakas, the Director of the Numismatic Museum in Athens. After a thorough examination, he was hired and his first task was to catalogue the numismatic library. His keen interest and his indefatigable ability to work won him a four-year government grant in 1883 to travel to the major European coin collections of Paris, Berlin and London and study numismatics. He worked and was trained by the great professors of that time: François Lenormant (1837-1883), Maxime Collignon (1849-1917), Alfred Croiset (1845-1923), Jules Martha (1853-1932), Paul Girard (1852-1922), Jules Girard (1825-1902), Olivier Rayet (1847-1887), Charles Clermont-Ganneau (1846-1923), Henri Weil (1818-1909), Ernest Renan (1823-1992) and Théophile Homolle (1848-1925) in Paris, Ernst Curtius (1814-1896), Carl Robert (1850-1922), Adolf Kirchhoff (1826-1908), Adolf Furtwängler (1853-1907), Hermann Schrader (1841-1915), Adolf Erman (1854-1937), Johannes Vahlen (1830-

[1] I would like to thank Yannis Stoyas for his help with the bibliography on Svoronos. See the two obituaries by G.P. OIKONOMOS in *RN* 26, 1923, p. 87-100 and in *JIAN* 21, 1927, p. 3-22 with a complete bibliography. See *The First Century of the Numismatic Museum 1829-1922*, Ministry of Culture and National Museum, Athens, 1988: M. OECONOMIDES-CARAMESSINI, p. 37-41 and O. PICARD, p. 92-93. See also 'The History of the Numismatic Museum', in M. GALANI-KRIKOU *et al.* (eds), *Coins & Numismatics*, Ministry of Culture and National Museum, Athens, 1996, p. 20-21.

1911), Eduard Zeller (1814–1908) and Otto Hirschfeld (1843–1922) in Berlin and at the British Museum he worked under the direction of Reginald Stuart Poole (1832–1895).

In 1884 before he even completed his studies, Svoronos started his first major book *Numismatique de la Crète ancienne*,^[2] written in French in order to qualify for the prize of the *Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres*, which he indeed won. This remarkable work already exhibited all the characteristics and strengths of Svoronos's approach and method: in his preface and introduction he clearly presented the rationale for a comprehensive study of an entire region – rather than an individual mint – and one that had been neglected until then in spite of the abundance of its mints and coin production. His aim was not a simple catalogue, though he did his best to visit all the major public and private collections and to go through the available publications to include as many specimens as possible, but to use coins to supplement the archaeological and epigraphical documents to reconstruct and better understand the history of the island. As O. Picard pointed out, this book, besides the great scholarly aptitude of the young Svoronos, also already revealed all of his character and passionate nature, which would bring him confrontation and political criticism in his later career: the uncompromising love of freedom for his fellow Greeks in his country and outside, combined with an unrelenting quest for scientific truth, difficult to obtain because it required the united pacific competition of the entire human community.^[3] The book is dedicated to the people of Crete: “C'est en Crète, que dès l'époque dite de Minos,^[4] des représentants de presque toutes les tribus de la race hellénique se rassemblèrent en un peuple pour fonder le premier état grec, état grand, fort et maître des mers, des îles et des côtes environnantes... C'est là que l'esprit hellénique s'est trouvé pour la première fois libre...”. This has to be read and understood within the political turmoil in the Balkans that led to the tragic events of World War I in Greece. Ancient historians and interpreters of the past cannot avoid being influenced by the politics of their own time. Svoronos did so out of love for his country. Too old to serve in combat himself, he fought for the cultural recognition and freedom of his people. His sons served in the war. Svoronos's work on Crete remains a fundamental pioneer study of the coinages of that island from the 5th to 2nd century BC, even after the work of G. Le Rider and several more recent studies on specific topics.^[5] It was reprinted in 1972.

[2] J.-N. SVORONOS, *Numismatique de la Crète ancienne, accompagnée de l'Histoire, la Géographie et la Mythologie de l'Île. Ouvrage récompensé par l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres (Paris) et publié aux frais de l'Assemblée des Crétois*, Macon, 1890.

[3] This is a summarized paraphrase of Picard 1988, p. 92. Readers are encouraged to read Picard's tribute to Svoronos as well as Svoronos's prefaces.

[4] *Numismatique de la Crète ancienne* was written between 1884 and 1890, well before Sir Arthur Evans's excavations of Knossos.

[5] G. LE RIDER, *Monnaies crétoises du v^e au I^{er} siècle av. J.-C.*, Paris, 1966; *Survey of Numismatic Research 2007–2013*, p. 74 (Selene Psoma).

In 1887 Svoronos completed his studies and returned to Greece to be appointed assistant in the National Numismatic Museum. He was soon to be sent back to Berlin at Theodore Mommsen's suggestion to work with Friedrich Imhoof-Blumer on the *Corpus Nummorum* project. Imhoof-Blumer had praised Svoronos's *Numismatique de la Crète ancienne* and recognized his aptitude to work on comprehensive numismatic studies. Their collaboration will continue for many years.

"Undying and unpardonable political and academic hatreds and a series of most unfortunate events and tragic coincidences darkened the start of Ioannis Svoronos's career and one of these was the end of the supremely honorable and patient Achilleas Postolakas, the 'heroic builder' ".^[6] In 1889 upon Postolakas's termination, the Greek Ministry of Trikoupis asked Svoronos to assume the directorship of the National Museum in Athens at the age of 26. He would remain in that post until his untimely death thirty-three years later and work unrelenting to put numismatics in Greece on an international level by his publications and the gifts and acquisitions he was able to bring to the museum.

One of his less known works, outside of Greece, is his translation with numerous additions in 1898 of Barclay V. Head's original *Historia Numorum*.^[7] Always eager to make the treasures of his country known to his people and to the world, he compiled a four volume catalogue of the sculptures of the National Museum in German and Greek.^[8] Svoronos already as a young scholar deplored the fact that few numismatists knew modern Greek. In an effort to remedy the situation and bring Greek scholarship on the national sphere he created in 1898 the *Journal International d'Archéologie Numismatique*, a yearly publication, which soon attracted many contributors. He single-handedly edited it and wrote innumerable articles for it, including every year a list of the National Museum's new acquisitions. It came to an end with his death: the last volume no. 21, published in 1927, contains his most detailed obituary.

Svoronos was able to attract many donors and their collections became the foundation of his most important publications. Between 1892 and 1898, Ioannis Dimitriou (Lemnos 1826 – Alexandria 1900), the cotton merchant who spent most of his life in Alexandria, donated his collection of Ptolemaic and of Roman provincial coins of Alexandria, unequalled in its kind and one of most spectacular possessions of the National Museum. This allowed Svoronos to bring to fruition the method of the *corpus nummorum* and to publish in 1904 his most important book *Tá νομίσματα τοῦ*

^[6] Oeconomides-Caramessini 1988, p. 37.

^[7] J.-N. SVORONOS, *Istoria ton nomismaton : etoi egcheiridon ellenikes nomismatikes, meta-phrasthen ek tes egglikes kai sumplerotheren*, Athens, 1898.

^[8] *Das Athener National Museum*, Athens, 1902-1912.

κράτους των Πτολεμαίων.^[9] It remains the fundamental reference work for the coinages of the Ptolemies, their mint attributions and chronology.

Between 1913 and 1919 Svoronos wrote *L'Hellénisme primitif de la Macédoine prouvé par la numismatique et l'or du Pangée* (Paris–Athens, 1919). The work was much criticized and is considered one of his more questionable books, condemned for its ‘nationalistic’ interpretations and mint attributions. It is not only useful but enlightening to read the preface,^[10] dedicated to Ernest Babelon “en témoignage cordial d’une amitié vieille de trente-six ans [...] Vous savez que j’ai entrepris cette tâche à l’heure même où ma chère patrie, après avoir uni, par le génie de notre grand homme d’État, Eleutherios Vénisélos, tous les États balkaniques dans une noble alliance, venait enfin – par une série de batailles glorieuses et grâce surtout à notre vaillante flotte, qui par de brillants combats, immobilisa les grandes forces turques de l’Asie – venait, dis-je, de donner la liberté au pays d’Alexandre le Grand en l’arrachant à la tyrannie séculaire des Turcs. Pendant cette lutte à laquelle mon âge ne me permit pas de prendre part, je me mis, du moins, au travail, comme tant de lettrés âgés de mon pays, pour apporter une nouvelle preuve que nous Hellènes, nous étions dignes non seulement de donner par les armes la liberté à ce célèbre pays hellénique et de l’ouvrir ainsi à la libre étude historique et archéologique de tout le monde civilisé...”. Svoronos, whole-hearted partisan of Venizelos against the Germanophile *régime* of King Constantine I, continued in this passionate tone by comparing the battle of the Marne with those of Marathon and Salamis. To the modern rational and often politically antiseptic mind, this rhetoric may seem extreme and unscholarly but Svoronos was a man of a rare consistency of thought and behavior, uncompromising. This brought him into conflict with colleagues and politicians in the years of World War I and some of the harsh criticism of his vision of ancient Macedonia was as tendentious as Svoronos’s was patriotic. Many of his attributions and ideas have been reinstated, most notably that of an early electrum coinage in the region of Macedonia.

In 1918 the Venizelos government gave Svoronos the Chair of Numismatics, Metrology and Sculpture at the University of Athens. He received the highest international awards, the medal of the Royal Numismatic Society from Sir Arthur Evans in 1914 and the Huntington Medal from The American Numismatic Society in New York from John Reilly in 1920.^[11]

[9] Athens, 1904. In Greek and German, 4 vol., 1212 p. and 40 pl. This book won a prize from the Munich Academy of Sciences, the ‘Prix Allier de Hauteroche’ from the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres and the B. de Jonghe prize from the Royal Numismatic Society of Belgium.

[10] Picard 1988, p. 93.

[11] See Oikonomos, *JIAN* 21, 1927, p. 9–11.

Ioannis Nicolas Svoronos died in Athens on 8 September 1922 of a stroke caused by overworking: he was publishing six works simultaneously at that time. The last of his four *magna opera*: *Trésor des monnaies d'Athènes*^[12] was published after his death thanks to Behrendt Pick. Unfortunately Svoronos did not have time to write the general text and catalogue but the arrangement of the plates reveals his classification. His notes and detailed listings of issues and monograms were never published. Nevertheless this is the only complete overview of the major ancient Greek mint.

The number and breath of Svoronos's publications is astounding: G.P. Oikonomos lists 155 works.^[13] Besides the major works discussed above, it is important to point out all the innumerable hoards of Greek, Roman and Byzantine coins that were acquired by the National Museum under his directorship, which he catalogued and published in detail as he did for all the collections and other acquisitions. In 1889 the museum's holdings included some 40,000 coins; by the time of his death in 1922 the collection comprised some 200,000 coins.^[14] One of his last works was the publication in 1922 of all the dies of the famous counterfeiter C. Christodoulos.

Ioannis Nicolas Svoronos remains a most inspiring if hard to follow example as a scholar and as a man.

[12] Bruckmann, Munich, 1923-1926.

[13] See n. 1.

[14] *JIAN* 15, 1912, p. 76 reports 154,330 coins acquired between 1890 and 1912.