

MESLAS, THE FOUNDER OF MESSEMBRIA,
ON A COIN FROM THE V CENTURY BC

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The accounts of the ancients telling that Messambria on the Black Sea was founded by the legendary Thracian Melsas, who gave the name of the city, has never arisen doubts neither in the Bulgarian nor in the foreign historiography up to now. All general writings on this relatively late colony of Megara, Byzantium and Chalcedon consider the combination of the *Melsas* part (*Melnas* in the earlier publications) with the Thracian word for city *-bria* (βρία). Thus, the publications of the Polish scholar Nawotka sound rather peculiar. He does not agree with this generally accepted thesis and claims that the legend of the founding of the city by the Thracian Melsas arose much later and hardly comprises any rational grain that would explain the name of the city as it was impossible for the combination *Mel-sambria* (Μελσαμβρία) to pass imitatively into *Messambria* (Μεσσαμβρία).¹

Prof. Velkov considered in detail the spelling of the name of the city in the various written sources.² Gerassimov drew attention to the changes in the legends on the coins.³ These were commented in some of my earlier publications,⁴ where attention is drawn on the existence of Messambrian reverses representing a wheel surrounded by rays; the legend is missing and there are swastikas in-between the spokes (Fig. 1). Two obols of the “Helmet, facing – wheel” Type appeared recently, and not only there was no legend but the swastikas were missing, as well (Fig. 2). It is also remarkable that we found the legend *MEΣ* and a swastika in the fourth sector of the wheel among the coins of the V Century BC of the “Athena – *META* in four squares” Type, along with the legend *META*. In other words, the legends *META* and *MEΣA* [swastika] (later *MEΣA*) are seen almost synchronously during the early period. In the IV, III and the first two decades of the II Centuries BC we read coin legends *META* and *METAM/BPIANΩN*, while in the second quarter of the II Century BC *Σ* appeared again instead of *T* in the legends.

When we talk about the legendary founder Melsas, we should pay attention not only on the legends but also on the circumstance concerning one obverse representation on a Messambrian bronze coin type, interpreted by Prof. Todor Gerassi-

¹ Nawotka 1994, 320–326; Nawotka 1997, 13–15.

² Velkov 1969, 27–28.

³ Gerassimov 1950, 27.

⁴ Karayotov 1994, 19.

mov as early as in 1950 as “head of Menas or Melsas”.⁵ These early issues of the IV Century BC bear the legend META with characteristically situated *M* at the lunar curve of the pelta. However, my doubts vanished after the emergence of one unique drachma without a legend. It is in the collection of a person who insists on staying anonymous. According to him, it comes from the *katoikia* of Messambria, situated close to the village of Kosharitsa, Nesebur Municipality.

The newly found coin could be described as follows:

1. Obverse: Helmet, facing, with notably protruding dots in the almond-like openings for the eyes.

Reverse: A wheel with four spokes. No legend. Head of a man is situated in one of the sectors. He is wearing a helmet with cheek-pieces and displays archaic features. An incised representation of swastika or *tetraskelia* that we know from drachmae is seen in the opposite sector.

Ag. 3.08g. Discovered at the Messambrian *katoikia* of “Kosharitsa” (Fig. 3). Private collection.

The eyes of a man wearing the helmet are clearly seen on all obverses, and it is perfectly natural to assume that it is not only an element of the protective armament of a warrior, but represents the founder of the city. This practice existed during the V Century BC in other cities as well, but the helmet is represented in profile. We will point out some examples: that of the Phocaean colony Massalia [Marseille]⁶ and of Phocaea itself, which both issued coins representing the head of Phocus, the *oikist* or his helmet and a seal on it.⁷

However, these had been *oikist*-s that led the groups of the first colonists and, naturally, they had been Greeks from certain metropoleis, and not from the local ethnos. Basing my arguments on the quoted competent numismatists, and taking in account series of particular archaeological and historical facts about Messambria, I assume that the Thracian *oikist* Melsas was the man in the helmet on the early Messambrian obols and drachmae.

The cult of the local heroes and deities had not been alien to the Greeks as early as in the first Centuries of the colonization. Apollonius Rhodius wrote that the Argonauts, these par excellence literature heroes from the colonization epoch, always paid their respects to the *herôs*-es and “local deities”. According to Hanell, this quality had not been unfamiliar to the Megarians, as well, and they were the ancestors of the Messambrians. They performed libations for the deities of the local tribes even in Colchis: “σπένδει δὲ Ἰάσων κατὰ τὸ παλαιὸν ἔθος. Τὸ δὲ ἦν σπένδειν τοὺς εἰς ἀλλοδαπὴν ἀφικόμενος τοῖς ἐγγχωρίοις θεοῖς”.⁸

⁵ Gerassimov 1950, 26., Pl. IV, 2.

⁶ Furtwängler 2000, 177.

⁷ Bodenstedt 1973, 43.

⁸ Hanell 1934, 161; Apoll. Rhod. II, 1274.

The facing helmeted *oikist* on the early issues of Messambria may be solely established in the ancient tradition and Melsas. A counter question should give the first answer to the argument that he is evidenced in the works of the late authors only. Was there indeed any other written evidence about Mesembria, except in Herodotus, which date from the V–III Centuries BC? The thread of Ariadne that is the sole means for us to pass through the labyrinth of the Centuries gone by and to reach the spiritual, cultural strata of the pre-Greek Messambria, also came to us though the late authors Strabo (Strab. 7, 6, 1) and Nicholas of Damascus, whose information came from Stephanus Byzantius (FrGrH Jacoby 2A, 346; 2C, 224). According to Prof. Venedikov, the Hallstatt archaeological strata in some areas on the Nesebur Peninsula get to thickness of 2m. In his opinion, the final phase of the Thracian layers date from the IV Century BC.⁹

Several ends in the shape of snakeheads in spiral bronze bracelets that were found recently in the Messambrian *katoikies* at the villages of Kosharitsa and Orizare near Nesebur, gave us the opportunity to compare the decorative elements with those of the Hallstatt ceramics of the pre-Greek strata. We found joined triangles filled with notches on these bronze “snakes”, which were a common decorative element on ceramics, as well. However, it is more important that we found an ornament consisting of concentric circles (Fig. 4) on two of the “snakes”, while other two were decorated with incised wheels of four spokes, surrounded by rays (Fig. 5). Are not these archaeological proofs to suggest exactly a cult relationship between the colonists and the local Thracians? They had probably an equally powerfully expressed cult of the sun and, eventually, in a later stage of the establishment of the Greek *politeia* Messambria – of Apollo respectively. More, does not it imply a political interaction that resulted in the inculcation of the Thracian legend about the founder Melsas into the mind of the newcomers from Byzantium and Chalcedon.

Heroization was meant in two of the Messambrian relief slabs. We find the datives *Ηρωσι* and *Ηρωι*, respectively, both in the already quoted inscription together with the name of Dioscuridas, and in Relief Slab No.2. However, they are accompanied by the already mentioned qualification “rescuer of the city” – “*Ηρωι Σωσιπόλει*”.¹⁰ The inscription on the upper frame of Relief Slab No.1 is completely destroyed but it is quite possible that it had been connected with the traditional for Messambria ritual of heroization. According to Prof. Mihailov and to both the dating and legends on the tetradrachms of Messambria, these three inscriptions date from the beginning (Dioscuridas), the middle (Oinias) and the last quarter of the II Century BC (Relief Slab No.2).¹¹ This concentration of the epigraphic material concerning heroizations in the II Century BC may also contribute

⁹ Venedikov 1980, 22.

¹⁰ Mihailov 1997, 5103.

¹¹ Karayotov 1994, т. II. 36, 38, 39, 74, 78.

to the considerations of Dr. Nawotka. However, I prefer to go back to the early V Century BC, when the basic principles of the Messambrian constitution started to take shape. Its literary text would hardly be ever found, but we will look for a possibility to clarify some of its obscure features based both on the thematic of the coin types and on epigraphic data, instead of leaving aside the interdisciplinary approach to the problem of the Thracian founder of Messambria – Melsas – like Dr. Nawotka did after a consideration on one rule of the Dorian phonetics.

The lapidary verse-like text is of considerable importance. It is a tombstone epigram of Julia, a priestess of Hecate and daughter of Neikios, and dates from the II Century AD. The fourth line reads:

“Μεσεμβρία δέ μν πατρὶς ἀπὸ Μέλσα και βρία”

Although the inscription is late, we should pay attention to the genitive Μέλσα that was probably a relict, as we find a genitive “ἀπὸ Μέλσου” in Stephanus Byzantius (FrGrH Jacoby 2A, 346; 2C, 224), who handed over information taken from Nicholas of Damascus that wrote in the period between 20 – 12 BC. More, we found a legend *ΜΕΛΣΑ* on a bronze coin type with a bucranium on the obverse and a fish on the reverse (Fig. 6), where is situated the legend,¹² while Dr. Nawotka was seeking a similar name as far as in the distant Spain.

The Thracian gloss *Μελσας* make us search for other names ending in *-ας*. I will give the following examples: *Σαδαλας* [gen. *-α* in the III Century BC; *-αν* in the I Century BC], *Μηδιστας*,¹³ *Βορεβιστας*,¹⁴ *Ροιμηθαλκας*. At that, the case ending for genitive of the name Sadala changed in course of the Centuries. If it was *-α* in the Messambrian text of the IV–III Century BC,¹⁵ it became *-ον* in the one from Odessos that dates from the I Century BC.¹⁶

The quoted line from the epigram of Julia, represented as Hecate on her tombstone – “Μεσεμβρία δέ μν πατρὶς ἀπὸ Μέλσα και βρία” – seems to have influenced the editor to read *Μελσα* in the disputable part of the codices, instead of *Μελνα* that was read earlier in Strabo.¹⁷ Recently, Dr. Bojadziev, the linguist, devoted a special study on that verse, and he concluded that two Thracian words were quoted in the metric text in their Thracian phonetic aspect Μέλσα και βρία standing next to the ancient Greek toponym *Μεσεμβρια*. This gave him the opportunity to perform relevant phonetic comparisons between the language of the Thracians and the Greek-speaking Messambrians.¹⁸ These probably reflected the comp-

¹² Topalov 1998, 36.

¹³ Mihailov 1970, 43, 307.

¹⁴ Mihailov 1970, 13, 323.

¹⁵ Mihailov 1970, 307.

¹⁶ Mihailov 1970, 43.

¹⁷ Strab. 7, 6, 1; Mihailov 1970, 345. (commentarium)

¹⁸ Bojadziev 1986, 184.

lex lingual problems of the so-called μιξ-έλληνες, which influenced changes in the Dorian dialect that deserve special studies as “La langue des inscription grecques en Bulgarie”.¹⁹ There, the world-known epigraph also broaches the phonetic changes in the toponym *Μεσσαμβρία* to illustrate the $\mu\beta < \nu\beta$ transition,²⁰ while the transformation of the $-\lambda\sigma- > -\sigma\sigma-$ is interpreted in the respective commentary of the tombstone epigram of Julia. Although this phonetic change cannot be explained through the phonetics of the Dorian dialect, Prof. Mihailov, the exclusive connoisseur of the ancient Greek, had no doubts about the existence of a Thracian *oikist* named Melsas.²¹ On the other hand, Prof. Georgiev thought that the $-\lambda\sigma-$ combination is “atypical” in Greek.²² Prof. Mihailov answered back by giving the example with the Greek word *αλσος* – sacred wood.²³

The combination *Μελσα* and *βρία* must have formed in an earlier epoch. It should have existed as early as at the time when the colonists from Byzantium and Chalcedon arrived on the Nesebur Peninsula. It must have formed in accordance with the hardly discernible rules of the Thracian phonetics. Unfortunately, we have just hints on both its sound and spelling in ancient Greek only. The phonetic analysis of the *Μελσ > Μεσσα > Μεσα* transition of Dr. Nawotka must be correct in the light of the historical grammar of the ancient Greek.²⁴ However, its phonetic tools are hardly effective in the analysis of the combination of two Thracian glosses that had happened before the Greek presence in Messambria. The Greek historic phonetics is also helpless in the analysis of *Μελσα[?]βρία* at the moment of the perceiving of this lingual hybrid, because it came from a language that was alien to the Greek. We have now the result only without knowing how it was achieved. The dynamics of the interaction between the Thracian and the Greek had been always obscure due to the lack of enough written documentation concerning the language of the Thracians.

It is perfectly clear for me, as I already pointed out, that the founder of the city Melas is represented on the first coin issues of Messambria. His image also appears during the second half of the IV Century BC on the bronze type: *Melsa-META* in pelta. A comparison between the linguistic and the numismatic data allows us to construct the following chronological system of the visible changes in the name of Messambria that occurred during the four Centuries of its autonomous coinage.

First phase: (475–450 BC) Silver obols and a unique for the time being drachma without legend (**Fig 2 and 3**). The earliest issue has diagonally situated squares incuse on the obverse. The small silver nominal with a wheel comes next.

¹⁹ Mihailov 1943.

²⁰ Mihailov 1943, 72.

²¹ Mihailov 1970, 345.

²² Georgiev 1967, 6.

²³ Mihailov 1970, 345. (comm.)

²⁴ Nawotka 1994, 325.

However, four swastikas (tetra-skelia) appear in-between the spokes of the wheel on one emission of obols (Fig. 1). We have an image of the *oikist* Melsas combined with a swastika in the opposite sector on the drachma. It is obvious that this miniature image bears the semantics of the name of the city, which will appear on the later issues. This and the helmet with “eyes” on the obverse should represent an ideogram stage that preceded letter writing on the Messambrian coins.

Second phase: (450–375 BC) A silver emission “Athena – *META* in four squares” that appears in parallel with the “Helmet, facing – wheel” Type. A legend *MEΣ* [swastika] appears among the reverses of the “helmet, facing” Type. Distinguished linguists interpret *T* as a graphic expression of the double sigma – *ΣΣ*. According to Prof. Dechev, the letter *T* overlaps the Phoenician “Ssade”.²⁵ *T* signifies also a double sigma in the legend *MAT* on the coins of the Phoenician colony Massalia of the V Century BC.²⁶ The swastika was a heritage from the preceding drachma type, but the possibility that it compensated the second *Σ* in the *ethnikon* should not be excluded as it is tautological, and a maximal shortness should have been sought in the four sectors of the wheel. However, in Massalia the legend took its natural form *MAΣΣ*, which is seen in some epigraphic monuments from Messambria, too.²⁷ The synchronous existence of both *META* and *MEΣ* reflects probably the moment of adaptation of the Thracian gloss *Me[λ?]σα[?]βρια* to the phonetics of the Dorian dialect. It is clear that it led to a collision between the Thracian articulation and the phonetics of the Dorians. The dual spelling of namely that element of the toponym, which had inherited the gloss *Μελσα*, may be accepted as a proof of that phonetic collision between the local language and that of the colonists. The legend *MEΣA* appears sporadically on a unique for the time being diobol from a time as early as the first half of the IV Century BC.

Third phase: (375–175 BC) The bronze coins of that period bear traditional legend *META*, and the more detailed legend *METAM/BPIANΩN* appeared between the years of 275 and 250 BC. The helmet on the diobols and the bronze coins does not have the incised eyes of Melsas anymore. The “Melsa-META in pelta” Type appeared sometime around 350 BC, and this is an indirect proof of the persistence of the cult of the heroized *oikist*. The “Helmet in profile – Celtic shield” Type appeared in the period between 250 and 200 BC. The helmet in profile on the tetradrachms and the staters was already only a symbol and a coat-of-arms of Messambria, but this does not abolish its genesis, irrevocably connected with the founder Melsas.

Fourth phase: (175–25 BC) *Σ* appeared once more in the legends. *META* turned into *MEΣA*, and *METAM/BPIANΩN* into *MEΣAM/BPIANΩN*. I accept that

²⁵ Dechev 1954, 387.

²⁶ Furtwängler 1993, 435.

²⁷ Mihailov 1970, 307.

this change took place in the years between 175 and 150 BC. During the II Century BC, the relief slabs of the *strategoi* prove that both the heroization and deification of the *herôs-es* had been a lasting practice in Messambria. The placing of the helmet on a pedestal and the representing of the *oikist* in an *aedicule* on the Relief Slab No.1, suggest a strong traditionalism in the *oikist* cult. This is a clear evidence that it is absolutely possible for the legend of Melsas to live on to the time of Strabo and Nicholas of Damascus.

Fifth phase: (AD 25–50) The legend *MEΣHMBPIA*, which is read on the coins of the types of “Demeter – Apollo”²⁸ and “Demeter – MEΣHMBPIANΩN caduceus”,²⁹ appeared for the first time on those coins along with the already recognized as a new tradition *MEΣAM/BPIANΩN*. These legend forms should have also been a reflectance of the language that was spoken in the city during the last quarter of the I Century BC, i.e. in the time when, according to Dr. Nawotka, the legend Melsas was written down.³⁰ If he is right, and Strabo and Nicholas of Damascus wrote down a newly born legend, how are we to explain the elementary sounding name of an official numismatic “document”, as well as the sudden homonymy with the noun *μεσημβρία* (middle of the day, noon)?

Sixth phase: (AD 117–249) Despite of the evidenced by the *MEΣHMBPIA* change in the pronunciation during the epoch of the Roman rule in Thrace, the old *MECAM/BPIANΩN* returned again in the period between AD 25–50, and the only difference was the transition towards the lunar sigma that appeared as early as the first issues of Hadrian in the period AD 120–125.³¹

Both numismatic and linguistic data presented here lead to the unambiguous conclusion that the later authors of the end of the I Century BC, like Homer, wrote down a really old legend about the founding of Messambria by the Thracian Melsas. Its local, Thracian character had been reflected as early as in the first silver issues of the city.

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²⁸ Karayotov 1995–1997, 43, Fig. 4, 11 a, b

²⁹ Karayotov 2000, 78, Fig. 2

³⁰ Nawotka 1994, 323.

³¹ Karayotov 2000.

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ILLUSTRATION

- Fig. 1. 01 Type of obol “Helmet, facing – wheel” with four swastikas.
- Fig. 2. 02 Type of obol “Helmet, facing – wheel” without legend.
- Fig. 3. 03 A and R. Drachma “Helmet, facing – wheel” with head of Melsas and swastika between the spokes of the wheel.
- Fig. 4. 04 Bronze snake-like bracelet, decorated with imprinted wheels.
- Fig. 5. 05 Bronze snake-like bracelet, decorated with wheels of four spokes, surrounded by rays
- Fig. 6. 06 Bronze coin of the type “Bucranium – *ΜΕΛΕΑ* fish”.



Fig. 2.A



Fig. 1.

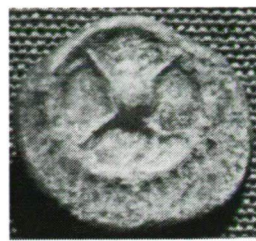


Fig. 2.R



Fig. 3.A



Fig. 3.R

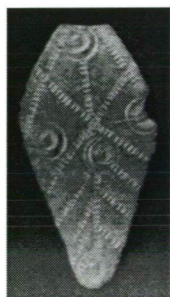


Fig. 4.

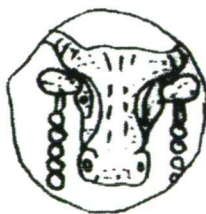


Fig. 6.



Fig. 5.