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# CONTENTS

## STUDIES

### ANCIENT HISTORY

#### Tobias HOFSTETTER

- D(IS) M(ANIBUS) S(ACRUM) – An Overview  
of Funerary Behaviours on the Territory  
of Present-day Switzerland  
from Late Protohistory to Early Medieval Times  
Through the Study of Material Remains,  
Textual Sources and Funerary Inscriptions ..... 5

#### Haggai OLSHANETSKY

- DO WE REALLY HAVE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE  
FOR JEWISH GLADIATORS? ..... 61

### NUMISMATICS

#### Ivo TOPALILOV

- THE ΜΕΛΕΑ COINS IN THRACE ..... 69

#### Cristian GĂZDAC, Vlad-Andrei LĂZĂRESCU, Sorin COCIȘ, Sergiu-Traian SOCACIU

- COINS IN ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT (II).  
THE CIVILIAN BATHS OF THE AUXILIARY FORT  
FROM SUTOR (ROMANIA, SĂLAJ COUNTY) ..... 74

### ARCHAEOLOGICAL MATERIAL

#### Beatrice CIUȚĂ

- ARCHAEOBOTANICAL EVIDENCE  
REGARDING THE DIET OF GAVA CULTURE  
FROM TELEAC HILLFORT (ROMANIA) ..... 102

#### Vitalie BÂRCĂ

- THE MIRROR WITH THICKENED RIM AND  
NAIL-SHAPED HANDLE FROM THE GETO-DACIAN  
SETTLEMENT OF POIANA (GALAȚI COUNTY, ROMANIA).  
NOTES ON ITS ORIGIN AND DATING ..... 112

#### Ceren ÜNAL, Zeynep ÇAKMAKÇI

- VIEWS ON THE SYMBOLIC USE  
OF TWO RARE BONE FINGER DISTAFFS  
WITH DOG REPRESENTATION  
FROM HALUK PERK MUSEUM IN ISTANBUL ..... 135

#### Alireza KOOCHAKZAEI

- IDENTIFICATION OF FIBERS AND WEAVING TECHNOLOGY  
IN THE REMAINS OF FABRICS DISCOVERED FROM KUH-E  
KHWAJA, A PARTHIAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE  
IN SISTAN, IRAN ..... 148

### ARCHAEOLOGICAL TOPOGRAPHY

#### Florin-Gheorghe FODOREAN

- MAPPING ROMAN DACIA. SEVERAL DATA REGARDING  
THE ROMAN ROAD CONNECTING DROBETA  
WITH ULPIA TRAIANA SARMIZEGETUSA ..... 156

#### Dan ȘTEFAN, Maria-Magdalena ȘTEFAN

- LIDAR VIEWS OF BRONZE AND IRON AGE HILL-TOP SITES  
IN THE SOUTH-EASTERN CARPATHIANS ..... 167

#### Constantin Viorel MARIAN, Mihaela IACOB, Nicolae GOGA

- THE INTERACTIVE DIGITAL MAP - A MODERN APPROACH  
FOR ARCHAEOLOGICAL HERITAGE MANAGEMENT ..... 215

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### THE ΜΕΛΣΑ COINS IN THRACE

**Abstract:** The present article deals with the short-term coinage with ΜΕΛΣΑ on its reverse that seems to have been issued in the fourth – beginning of third century BC. The author accepts that it is about an individual name and links it with the deeds of an unknown yet Thracian dynast in whose territory the Messambrian *polichnion* Bizone was established. At this very time a specific Messambrian coinage appeared revealing the creation of a new cult to the *oikist* whose name in the sources of 1<sup>st</sup> century BC is Melsas. The establishment of the *polichnion* in his territory and his potential support allowed this Thracian dynast to be honoured as an *oikist* whose cult received an impetus when the Dorian politeia joined the Thracian province of the Roman empire.

**Keywords:** *Melsa, Messambria, Bizone, oikist, myth.*

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In 1998 St. Topalov published a bronze coin issue that had remained unknown until that moment:

*Obv.*: Filleted bucranium facing, within dotted border.

*Rev.*: Fish l.; below ΜΕΛΣΑ. (Fig. 1)<sup>1</sup>

Subsequently, such coins were found in other collections, such as those of the Welfare Foundation for Social and Cultural Affairs (KIKPE), Athens and the Regional History museum in Varna.<sup>2</sup> Logically, from the very beginning they raised questions, some of which have still not found answers or have answers based on consensus. Among the items in question are the dating of the coin issue itself, the identification of the ΜΕΛΣΑ legend, the coins' denominations, the location of their mint, and range of their distribution. Particular progress in the study has been made by Y. Stoyas in certain recent publication. For example, initially it was suggested that the minting of the coinage, which was most likely short-term, should be dated to the second - first century BC.<sup>3</sup> This date was later changed to the fourth – third century BC.<sup>4</sup> A complex study of the coin issue's iconography and of parallels of particular elements found on other coins as well as tomb frescoes allowed Y. Stoyas to advance a new and more precise dating of this coinage to the end of fourth - the beginning of the third century BC. Two reprints played a crucial role in this suggestion: one on a coin of Philip II of Macedon (360 / 359–336 BC) and another on the coin of Cassander (ca. 316–305 BC).<sup>5</sup>

Unlike the date of the coinage, which now seems to be clearly established, the meaning of the legend ΜΕΛΣΑ remains unclear. This legend

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<sup>1</sup> TOPALOV 1988, 10–14; TOPALOV 1998, 36–49.

<sup>2</sup> See STOYAS 2012, 157–158 for these and other locations that hold examples of the coin in their collection.

<sup>3</sup> TOPALOV 1988, 10–14; TOPALOV 2007, 290.

<sup>4</sup> KARAJOTOV 2004, 10.

<sup>5</sup> STOYAS 2012, 158–160, 162, 165.



**Fig. 1.** Solidus Numismatik, Auction 8, Lot 36, Date: 23.04.2016.

could be an individual name, the designation of an ethnic tribe,<sup>6</sup> a city name,<sup>7</sup> or something else. What is clear is that if the legend is supposed to indicate the name of an individual, it should be developed as Μέλσας, -α. This is a Dorian form<sup>8</sup> and probably reveals such an origin. This legend would thus also show that the coinage was issued exclusively among Dorian environs or was intended for such a limited distribution.

Despite the uncertainty about the identification of ΜΕΛΣΑ, two options are accepted in the current literature as most possible. One option is that ΜΕΛΣΑ indicates a historical character, most probably a Thracian ruler, who has remained unknown until now.<sup>9</sup> Another option advanced by Y. Stoyas is that this coinage was minted on the occasion of a festival that was celebrated in a sanctuary located in the vicinity of Byzantion and that called on the nymph Semystra (Σημύστρα). As the sanctuary was related to the eponymous oikist Bizas and since it was believed that Byzantion itself was to be founded at this place, it is not surprisingly that a legend spread that this place was reached by the Argonauts, who under the leadership of their king Meltas founded a settlement. Subsequently, an altar was erected with bull sacrifices, which is reflected on the coinage of Byzantion from the end of the fifth to beginning of the fourth century BC through the image of a bull. In a myth revealed by a Late antique source, the sanctuary's location is associated with a hunt by Bizas who was sent by the Thracian king Melias to capture a bull. As it is possible that this festival was visited by residents of the western Black Sea coast and the Thracian hinterland of Byzantion, Y. Stoyas suggests that the legend ΜΕΛΣΑ was placed on the coins. In this case, the name

referred to a legendary person whose cult took place in the sanctuary. The coinage itself was used during a temporary shortage in small change and was a part of the known *panegyris* coinage from Antiquity.<sup>10</sup>

The conclusions reached by Y. Stoyas are a step forward in the study of the ΜΕΛΣΑ coinage. They offer solutions for the presentation of the fish and bull decorations and for the coins' date and purpose. However, the lack of a tradition that links the name of Melsas with that very sanctuary casts doubt on Y. Stoyas' conclusions. Besides, the name is related more to the Western Black Sea coast as Y. Stoyas suggests.<sup>11</sup> This relation, combined with the fact that the name is so far not attested in the vicinity of Bizantion, reveals that the tradition with ΜΕΛΣΑ is associated more with the Western Black Sea area than with the sanctuary itself and the vicinity of Byzantion. Until the discovery of any evidence for Melsas at Byzantion or nearby, this idea remains questionable. As is well known from written sources, in one of the Western Pontic *politeiai*, namely the Dorian Messembria, there was a tradition according to which a certain Melsas was in fact the mythical eponymous oikist of the *politeia*.<sup>12</sup>

Despite this tradition, the Melsas in question cannot be taken as an example of the mythical eponymous founder of Messambria because his name is in fact not bound up in the name of the *politeia* that is presented on the epigraphic monuments and local coinage as ΜεΤαμβρία or Με(σ)αμβρία.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, the cult of the *oikist* Melsas originated in a later period, and K. Nawotka suggested that

<sup>6</sup> ΜΕΛΣΑ as an ethnic name in genitive plural of a version such as Melsa[nōn], i.e. "of the Melsans", or Melsa[niōn] - STOYAS 2012, 160.

<sup>7</sup> TOPALOV 1988, 13, where a link with the settlement named Melta is suggested on the basis of the transformation of the letter T into letter Σ during second - first century BC. It should be noted that in this case we are dealing with the sign of 'sampi' rather than the letter 'T'.

<sup>8</sup> See for this STOYAS 2012, 161.

<sup>9</sup> TOPALOV 1988, 12; TOPALOV 1998, 39; KARAYOTOV 2009, 20. In TOPALOV 2007, 290 coins of a local dynast are mentioned.

<sup>10</sup> See the written sources and comments in STOYAS 2012, 163-166.

<sup>11</sup> STOYAS 2012, 166: 'For reasons that may have to do with the attendance of people also from the Black Sea coast and the Thracian hinterland, with a shared or syncretic tradition, the form ΜΕΛΣΑ could have been adopted, referring to a person in the sphere of legend'.

<sup>12</sup> For this tradition - see Nikolaos Damaskenos (end of first century BC), quoted through Stephanos Byzantios, *Ethnika*, s. v. Μεσημβρία (FGrH 90, fr. 43): ἐκλήθη ἀπὸ Μέλσου βρία γὰρ τὴν πόλιν φασὶ Θράκες ὡς οὖν Σηλυμβρία ἢ τοῦ Σήλους πόλις, Πολτυμβρία ἢ Πόλτυος [πόλις], οὕτω Μελομβρία ἢ Μέλσου πόλις, καὶ διὰ τὸ εὐφρονότερον λέγεται Μεσημβρία; IG Bulg. I<sup>2</sup>, 345: Μεσεμβρία (sic) δέ μιν (sic) πατρὶς ἀπὸ/ [Μ(?)] ἔλσα καὶ βρία.

<sup>13</sup> See the list of the names of Messambria provided in VELKOV 1969, 27-28.



**Fig. 2.** Classical Numismatic Group, Inc., Auction: Electronic Auction 415, Lot 8, Date 28.02.2018

it was established in 2-1 c. BC as a response to the need of the Messambrian society to claim association with Greek mythological figures.<sup>14</sup> This proposal, however, cannot be accepted in two of its major points: the date of its foundation as well as its purpose. Thus, the evidence of Nicholas of Damascus provides only a *terminus ante quem* for the circulation of the legend and the existence of the myth near the end of 1<sup>st</sup> c. BC and says nothing about the beginning of either. Besides, it may be that this evidence was added to the original text by its later compiler Stephanus of Byzantium. As for Messambria's perceived need to pursue greater legitimacy through mythical connections, it is noteworthy that the city's first silver obols decorated with the Corinthian helmet and dated to the first half of 5<sup>th</sup> c. BC may be regarded as such a solution to this perceived need. This symbolism provides a clear link with the events described in Homer's *Iliad* and especially with the passage devoted to Patroclus' rampage in book 16.<sup>15</sup> As a significant aspect of local political propaganda, it is not surprising that this iconography was the most popular of the images on Messambrian silver and bronze coinage.<sup>16</sup> This iconographic type was used almost throughout the whole period of pre-Roman Messambrian coinage.<sup>17</sup>

It has been suggested that a new type of image appeared on the obverse of Messambrian coins in the last quarter of the fourth century BC:

*Obv.*: the head of a young man with an Attic helmet with a cheek-pieces and a decoration of opposite volutes on the forehead-piece and neck-piece of the helmet, right

*Rev.*: META in pelta (an Amazonian shield) (fig. 2).<sup>18</sup>

Before well-preserved specimens were available, it was assumed that the head of the goddess Athena was presented on the obverse of these coins.<sup>19</sup> When better-preserved specimens became available, however, it became clear that the obverse instead shows the head of a young man

with the features of the goddess. In fact, it was in 1950 when T. Gerasimov first advanced the idea that the young man was the eponymous *oikist* of the Messambrian *politeia* Melsas.<sup>20</sup> This idea was recently advanced again by I. Karayotov based on better preserved specimens.<sup>21</sup> These examples reveal that the male character is presented in an idealized way with the characteristic features of the goddess Athena, which caused the former confusion. I believe that a connection between the goddess and *oikist* was intentional in order to capture a new polis ideology concerning Messembria's past. The new iconographic features of the *oikist* that resemble those of the goddess Athena may be regarded as a consequence of the growing Athenian influence in the region at that time. In fact, the idealized person presented as the *oikist* may refer not only to a new legend, which meets the new social and political requirements of Messambrian society, but also to a new *oikist*. The image is new to Messambrian coinage and clearly distinct from the previous coin issues. It is noteworthy that significant changes in the institution of the *oikist* occurred at that time. The *oikist* gained duties that were not necessarily related to the actual founding of the *politeia*.<sup>22</sup> Given that a cult to a new *oikist* named Melsas was created, as Nicolaos of Damascus' evidence reveals, I would rather suggest that the coins in question were issued on the occasion of the establishment of this new *oikist*'s cult in the last quarter of 4<sup>th</sup> century BC. The issuing at that time of coins with the legend MEΛΣΑ that are associated with the existence of a Dorian tradition in a certain area on the Western Black Sea coast raises the question whether the Messambrian *oikist* Melsas was in fact the MEΛΣΑ found on the coins' obverses.

The evidence for this idea is scanty, but I believe that it finds support both in the distribution of the coins and the specifics of Messambria's colonisation policy. The limited number of bronze coins with the legend MEΛΣΑ known so far originates mostly from northeastern Bulgaria in the region of Varna, but some also come from the region of Sozopol and Burgas.<sup>23</sup> The core of the distribution area is near modern

<sup>14</sup> NAWOTKA 1994, 326.

<sup>15</sup> HIND 2007, 24.

<sup>16</sup> On the coinage and date see KARAYOTOV 2009, 35.

<sup>17</sup> KARAYOTOV 2009, 36-41.

<sup>18</sup> KARAYOTOV 2009, 32-33; pl. V-VII, Nos. 1-136.

<sup>19</sup> See for example PRICE 1993, pl. X, No. 277.

<sup>20</sup> GERASIMOV 1950, 26, No 15, Table IV, 2, accepted in TOPALOV 1995, 11, 80, who, however, assumed that the eponymous *oikist* was Μενας.

<sup>21</sup> See most recently KARAYOTOV 2009, 30-32.

<sup>22</sup> LESCHHHORN 1984, 333-334.

<sup>23</sup> See TOPALOV 1998, 36-37; TOPALOV 2007, 290; STOYAS 2012, 157-158.

Shabla, where a large concentration of the coins were found.<sup>24</sup> This geographical area coincides completely with the area of the distribution of the Messambrian coins<sup>25</sup> and reveals that the coins with the ΜΕΛΣΑ legend gained acceptance in Messambria's environs. As Messambria was a Dorian colony, this may explain the Dorian character of the legend ΜΕΛΣΑ and suggests that this coin issue was intended for the Messambrians or a population accustomed to Messambrian coins.

Messambria's colonization policy can also explain the ΜΕΛΣΑ coin legend. Within the core of the ΜΕΛΣΑ coins' distribution area was located one of Messambria's two *polichnions* – that of Bizone (Βιζώνη) (now Kavarna), about which Ps.-Skymnos says the following:

(...) Βιζώνη. (...) τοῦτο δὲ  
τὸ πολίχνιον φασὶν τινες μὲν βαρβάρων,  
τινὲς δ' ἄποικον γεγενῆσθαι Μεσημβρίας

v. 758 D (Βιζώνη πόλις) φασὶν τινες μὲν βαρβάρων.<sup>26</sup>

This passage, although neglected in past studies,<sup>27</sup> is clear evidence that Bizone was a *polichnion* of Messambria rather than a colony of Miletus or any of its other West Pontic *apoikiai*, as current scholarship suggests.<sup>28</sup> This point is also confirmed by the name of the settlement, which is Thracian.<sup>29</sup> Bizone, then, was either a settlement of Hellenic colonists at an already existing Thracian settlement, which became a *polichnion*, or a new settlement founded near an existing native one, which over time joined the Hellenic settlement. Archaeological excavations currently have not revealed architectural remains of a Hellenic settlement from the sixth century BC,<sup>30</sup> but the earliest discovered burials in the area around Kavarna do date back to the fourth century BC<sup>31</sup> and so suggest the *polichnion*'s existence. The majority of the pottery dates more to the fifth-third century BC,<sup>32</sup> while the earliest amphorae date to the Hellenistic period.<sup>33</sup> All this, in my opinion, shows that the beginning of the Messambrian *polichnion* should date back to the fourth century BC,<sup>34</sup> which coincides with the time of the appearance of the *oikist* Melsas on Messambrian coins as well as the appearance of the coins with the legend ΜΕΛΣΑ.

This brief analysis allows me to suggest that the Messambrian *oikist* Μέλσας presented as ΜΕΛΣΑ in the

coins considered here is in fact a Thracian governor (dynast) in whose territory the new *polichnion* of Bizone was built. It is logical to assume that this might have happened only with his support. The appearance of the image of a new *oikist* with the same name on Messambrian coins thus may be referring to the founding of Bizone as an act of „founding“ the *politeia* itself since the *polichnion* was considered an integral part of Messambria. Having in mind the changes that the institution of the *oikist* underwent at that time, it should not be surprising if the dynast Melsas was honored as an *oikist* of the *politeia*.

The admission of a close link between Messambria and a local Thracian ruler or dynast of the Odrysian kingdom named Melsas would not have been an exception to accepted practice. There is, for instance, the famous connection between the *politeia* and the local dynast Sadalas. Known from an inscription dated between 281-277 BC, this connection entailed Messambria honoring Sadalas' as a *proxenia*. This inscription also reveals the existence of this tradition in earlier period by mentioning the names of four more predecessors of Sadalas that had such close relations with Messambria, among which is the son of the Odrysian ruler Kersebleptos Medista.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> TOPALOV 2016, 12-13.

<sup>25</sup> KARAYOTOV 2009, 115-121, 494, map 1.

<sup>26</sup> Ps.-Skymnos vv. 758-760. See also Anon. *Peripl. M. Eux.* 75.

<sup>27</sup> See most recently in BOSHNAKOV 2007, 173-179.

<sup>28</sup> AVRAM/HIND/ TSETSKHLADZE 2004, 932.

<sup>29</sup> DETSCHEW 1976, 61.

<sup>30</sup> AVRAM/HIND/ TSETSKHLADZE 2004, 932.

<sup>31</sup> On the necropolises – see SALKIN 1982, 31; MINCHEV 1982, 40-44. On the necropolises of Bizone – see particularly PANAYOTOVA 2007, 88 and bibliography cited there.

<sup>32</sup> HIND 1992 - 1993, 87; On the pottery see also DOMŽALSKI 2007, 161-181. On the port which functioned in 4-3 c. BC see TONCEVA 1994, 143-144.

<sup>33</sup> LAZAROV 1998, 93. On the amphorae stamps from Bizone and its vicinity – see BANEV/ LAZOV/ SALKIN 1985, 29-33.

<sup>34</sup> K. Boshnakov recently suggested that the establishment of the Messambrian *polichnion* should be dated between 450-431 BC – BOSHNAKOV 2007, 177.

<sup>35</sup> IGBulg. I<sup>2</sup>, 307.

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