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Design & layout: Petru Ureche
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 1st 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.

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)

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. 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. This date was later changed to the fourth – third century BC. 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).

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

1 TOPALOV 1988, 10-14; TOPALOV 1998, 36–49.
2 See STOYAS 2012, 157-158 for these and other locations that hold examples of the coin in their collection.
3 TOPALOV 1988, 10-14; TOPALOV 2007, 290.
4 KARAJOrov 2004, 10.
5 STOYAS 2012, 158-160, 162, 165.
Studies in a sanctuary located in the present, by the Argonauts, π arisen ages that the sent by the Thracian king Melias o at this place, it is not surprisingly that a, 12; TOPALOV 2007, 8 dealing with the sign of ‘sampi’ rather than the letter ‘T’. during second – first century BC. It should be noted that in suggesting on the basis of the transformation of the letter T into letter ΜΕΛΣΑ illustrate an antique source, sacrifice set up by a bull. As it is possible that this festival was visited by the leadership of their king Meltas founded a settlement. Subsequently, an altar was erected for such a limited distribution. 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. 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 ΜεΣαμβρία or Μεσ(σ)αμβρία. Therefore, the cult of the oikist Melsas originated in a later period, and K. Nawotka suggested that

4 MEΛΑΣ as an ethnic name in genitive plural of an version such as Melsa[non], i.e. “of the Melsans”, or Melsa[non]- STOYAS 2012, 160. 7 TOPALOV 1988, 13, where a link with the settlement named Melta is suggested on the basis of the transformation of the letter Τ 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’. 4 See for this STOYAS 2012, 161. 8 TOPALOV 1988, 12; TOPALOV 1998, 39; KARAYOTOV 2009, 20. In TOPALOV 2007, 250 coins of a local dynasty are mentioned. 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.10

The conclusions reached by Y. Stoyas are a step forward in the study of the MEΛΑΣ 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.11 This relation, combined with the fact that the name is so far not attested in the vicinity of Bizantion, reveals that the tradition with MEΛΑΣ 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.12

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 ΜεΣαμβρία or Μεσ(σ)αμβρία. Therefore, the cult of the oikist Melsas originated in a later period, and K. Nawotka suggested that

8 See the written sources and comments in STOYAS 2012, 163-166. 11 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 MEΛΑΣ could be had been adopted, referring to a person in the sphere of legend’. 12 For this tradition – see Nikoas Damaskenos (end of first century BC), quoted through Stephanos Byzantios, Ethnika, s. v. Μεσσημβρία (FGΘ 90, fr. 43): ἦλθη ἀπὸ Μέλσου βραία γιὰ τὸν πόλιν φασὶ θρήσκες ὡς αὐτὸ Σελευκίδεια ἢ τὸν Σίλους πόλις, Πολυμακρία ἢ Πόλυμνος [πόλις], οὔτω Μεσσημβρία ἢ Μέλσου πόλις, καὶ διὰ τὸ εὑρωνότερον λέγεται Μεσσημβρία; ΙΓΒυζ, 1, 345: Μεσσημβρία (sic) δὲ μο (sic) πατρικίς ἀπὸ [Μ (?)] έλευ καὶ βρά. 13 See the list of the names of Messambria provided in VELKOV 1969, 27-28.
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.\textsuperscript{14} 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 \textit{terminus ante quem} for the circulation of the legend and the existence of the myth near the end of 1\textsuperscript{st} 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\textsuperscript{th} 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 \textit{Iliad} and especially with the passage devoted to Patroclus’ rampage in book 16.\textsuperscript{15} 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.\textsuperscript{16} This iconographic type was used almost throughout the whole period of pre-Roman Messambrian coinage.\textsuperscript{17}

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:

\textbf{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

\textbf{Rev.:} META in pelta (an Amazonian shield) (fig. 2).\textsuperscript{18}

Before well-preserved specimens were available, it was assumed that the head of the goddess Athena was presented on the obverse of these coins.\textsuperscript{19} When better-preserved specimens became available, however, it become 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 \textit{oikist} of the Messambrian \textit{politeia} Melsas.\textsuperscript{20} This idea was recently advanced again by I. Karayotov based on better preserved specimens.\textsuperscript{21} 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 \textit{oikist} was intentional in order to capture a new polis ideology concerning Messambria’s past. The new iconographic features of the \textit{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 \textit{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 \textit{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 \textit{oikist} occurred at that time. The \textit{oikist} gained duties that were not necessarily related to the actual founding of the \textit{politeia}.\textsuperscript{22} Given that a cult to a new \textit{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 \textit{oikist}’s cult in the last quarter of 4\textsuperscript{th} century BC. The issuing at that time of coins with the legend \textit{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 \textit{oikist} Melsas was in fact the \textit{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 \textit{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.\textsuperscript{23} The core of the distribution area is near modern

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image}
\caption{Classical Numismatic Group, Inc., Auction: Electronic Auction 415, Lot 8, Date 28.02.2018}
\end{figure}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{14} NAWOTKA 1994, 326.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{15} HIND 2007, 24.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{16} On the coinage and date see KARAYOTOV 2009, 35.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{17} KARAYOTOV 2009, 36-41.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{18} KARAYOTOV 2009, 32-33; pl. V-VII, Nos. 1-136.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{19} See for example PRICE 1993, pl. X, No. 277.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{20} GERASIMOV 1950, 26, No 15, Table IV, 2, accepted in TOPALOV 1995, 11, 80, who, however, assumed that the eponymous \textit{oikist} was Menas.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{21} See most recently KARAYOTOV 2009, 30-32.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{22} LESCHHHORN 1984, 333-334.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{23} See TOPALOV 1998, 36-37; TOPALOV 2007, 290; STOYAS 2012, 157-158.}
Shabla, where a large concentration of the coins were found. This geographical area coincides completely with the area of the distribution of the Messambrian coins 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 polichniai – that of Bizone (Βιζώνη) (now Kavarna), about which Ps.-Skymnos says the following:

(...) Βιζώνη. (...) τοῦτο δὲ τὸ παλαιότερον φασιν τινε μὲν βαρβάρων, τινὲς δ’ ἀποικοι γεγονέαν Μεσπεμβρίας ν. 758 D (Βιζώνη πόλις) φασιν τινε μὲν βαρβάρων.

This passage, although neglected in past studies, is clear evidence that Bizone was a polichnion of Messambria rather than a colony of Miletus or any of its other West Pontic apoklises, as current scholarship suggests. This point is also confirmed by the name of the settlement, which is Thracian. 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, but the earliest discovered burials in the area around Kavarna do date back to the fourth century BC and so suggest the polichnion’s existence. The majority of the pottery dates more to the fifth-third century BC, while the earliest amphora date to the Hellenistic period. All this, in my opinion, shows that the beginning of the Messambrian polichnion should date back to the fourth century BC, 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 Μέλας 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 had 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 Kersebleto Medista.

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26 Ps.-Skymnos vv. 758-760. See also Anon. Peripl. M. Eux. 75.
27 See most recently in BOSHNAKOV 2007, 173-179.
28 AVRAM/HIND/ TSETSKHLADZE 2004, 932.
29 DETSCHEW 1976, 61.
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34 K. Boshnakov recently suggested that the establishment of the Messambrian polichnion should be dated between 450-431 BC – BOSHNAKOV2007, 177.
35 IGBulg, P. 307.
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