

## THE FOUNDER'S CULT IN MESSAMBRIA PONTICA

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### Abstract

The article deals with the early history of the *politeia* Messambria Pontica through the prism of the foundation myth and cult. The almost simultaneous establishment of the cult and myth to the historical founder and mythical eponymous hero-founder attested on the silver coinage of Messambria may refer to a certain need of a group of Messambrian society to present itself in a certain way at-home and abroad. The author believes that this should be considered within the ethnic discourse between Ionians and Dorians.

**Keywords:** Messambria Pontica, foundation myth, eponymous hero, historical *oikist*, ethnics.

The cult of the founder of the city is not only one of the most popular cults in Messambria but also one of the most frequently represented on various media, both local and foreign. Messambrian coinage, epigraphic monuments, and probably reliefs stand out among local media but the interpretation of some of them, viz. the so-called ‘reliefs of the strategists,’ that are associated in the literature with the founder’s cult<sup>1</sup> are disputable.<sup>2</sup> Foreign media consists of literary sources; some of these like Pseudo-Skymnos, however, are very likely to transmit local tradition. Regardless of the nature of the source, all of them in one form or another reveal the centuries-long significance of the cult of the Founder and the foundation myth to the Messambrians. All of these sources also allow the foundation myth’s development to be traced at least within the first five centuries of Messambria’s history, i.e. approximately until the city’s incorporation into the Roman Empire. Analysis of available sources even reveals the foundation myth’s fabrication,<sup>3</sup> a practice that is known in many other cases and is reflected in numismatic evidence in Thrace.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Marazov 2004, 19–28.

<sup>2</sup> Honouring two *oikists* at the same day as some of the reliefs are assumed to show is unlikely.

<sup>3</sup> Nawotka 1994. *Contra* Karayotov 2007a, 359; 2007b, 23–32; 2009, 20–21; Damyanov 2018, 251.

<sup>4</sup> Topalilov 2023.

By studying the foundation myth, we also explore some of the specific problems faced by local society over the years and how these problems relate to this society redefining its identity in various ways from the beginning of the *polis* itself.<sup>5</sup> In fact, when it comes to the study of ancient Messambria, the foundation myth provides one of the best chances to look deeper into the domestic political life of the city and to reveal the course of processes for which no other information is so far available. Messambria is a good example, especially since its political life until the city's incorporation into the Roman Empire was extremely dynamic in both foreign and domestic spheres. With regard to the city's foreign policy, its relations with local Thracian tribes stand out, most probably mainly with the *Nipseis* and later with both dynasts and paradynasts from the Odrysian kingdom and the Celts and Getae. The city also had active relations with the wider Hellenic world, both in Thrace (especially in the cases of neighboring Apollonia and Byzantium) and in the network of cities-colonies built by Megara (Megarian *arhe*).<sup>6</sup> It seems that domestic political life was no less dynamic, which includes relations between certain ethnic and social groups in society who sought solutions for their needs precisely in Messambria's foundation myth. Thus, Messambria is one of the few cities in Thrace, along with Abdera and Byzantium, that was able to take advantage of the full potential that the foundation myth and cult of the city's founder offered for the advancement of domestic policy. Numismatic material allows us to assume that the foundation myth in Messambria began to play an important role in the domestic political life of *politeia* from the very beginning of its existence. In their studies, Ivan Karayotov and Stavri Topalov consider two silver obols and one drachma, which can be attributed to the earliest coin issues of Messambria (**Figs. 1–2**).

Ivan Karayotov attributes these issues to the first phase of the Messambrian coinage, which he dates to 475–450 BC,<sup>7</sup> and Stavri Topalov placed them between 480–470 BC.<sup>8</sup> In both images, Ivan Karayotov sees the image of the *oikist*. He asserts that the eyes placed in the openings of the Corinthian helmet on the obverse of the city's obols and drachma make the helmet not simply a symbol (*πάρᾶσημον*) of the city,<sup>9</sup> as is the case with many of the other coin issues of the city, but rather a representation of a separate character, which he accepts as the *oikist* of Messambria named Melsas.<sup>10</sup> On the reverse side of the silver drachma between the spokes of the wheel is another image presented in a specific archaic, manner, which he also perceives as the image of Melsas.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See for the Ionian cities in this respect: Mac Sweeney 2013; for the southern Black sea coast: Faulkner-Gentry 2021, 27–32. Some particular examples are also studied in Mac Sweeney 2015. Some notes in general on the founders in Western Pontic cities are in Nawotka 2021.

<sup>6</sup> On this network which is the core of the Megarian *arhe*, see Robu 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Karayotov 2007a, 354–355, 361.

<sup>8</sup> Topalov 2001, 60.

<sup>9</sup> Karayotov 2009, 99.

<sup>10</sup> Karayotov 2007a, 354–356.

<sup>11</sup> Karayotov 2007a, 361.



**Fig. 1.** Messambria, AR Obol, 0.43 g., 9 mm.

*Obv.* Facing Corinthian helmet, with hinted eye-orbits of the *oikist*; *Rev.* Four spoked wheel with a shield in the middle and short lines along the periphery. The spokes of the wheel end in miniature triangles.<sup>12</sup> (Numismatik Naumann, formerly Gitbud & Naumann, Auction 89, Lot 39, Date: 3.05.2020)



**Fig. 2.** Messambria, AR Drachma, 3.08 g., 16 × 17 mm.

*Obv.* Crested Corinthian helmet facing with bulging dots in the apertures for the eyes; *Rev.* Four spoked wheel with swastika (tetraskelion) and a male head in profile inserted within two of the quarters<sup>13</sup>

If this is so, it turns out that in this case we are dealing with the image of the same character (the founder Melsas) on both sides of the drachma, which seems to me unlikely. Indeed, we are aware of synchronous coin issues of other Hellenic colonies

<sup>12</sup> SNG BM Black Sea, No. 265.

<sup>13</sup> Topalov 2001, 54–55; Karayotov 2002, 11–14.

on whose obverse and reverse the image of the *oikist* is represented, but in these cases it is not a question of representing the same character but two different founders. For example, on a silver drachma of Calabrian Tarentum issued ca. 450 BC,<sup>14</sup> Phalanthos the *oikist* is riding a dolphin on the obverse and the eponymous hero Taras is seated and holds a distaff and a kantharos on the reverse. Despite the importance of the cult of the Founder and the foundation myth, I am not familiar with examples that represent the same *oikist* on both sides of the coin issue. For this and other reasons and based on an analogy with Kalchedonian coinage, which was related to the Messambrian at the time under consideration, I assume that the archaic type on the reverse of the drachma can be identified as the mythical eponymous founder of *politeia*. Meanwhile, the representation on the obverse should be that of the historical *oikist* of Messambria.<sup>15</sup>

It should be noted that on the earliest Kalchedonian coins, which are contemporary with the Messambrian coins considered here, an archaic iconographic type is presented as well, which is identified as Kalchas the mythical eponymous founder of the Kalchedon. He is directly related to the archaic image of Apollo on other coins of Kalchedon from that time, and the two images differ from others on Kalchedonian coinage because of their archaic manner of presentation. The two coin issues under consideration are as follows (Figs. 3–4):



**Fig. 3.** Kalchedon, AR Drachma, 3.52 g.

*Obv.* Bearded and bared male head left; *Rev.* Wheel of four spokes within shallow circular incuse.  
(Gorny & Mosch Giessener Münzhandlung, Auction 175, Lot 118; Date: 9.03.2009)

The two coin issues in question, in my opinion, clearly reveal the close connection between the mythical eponymous founder Kalchas and Apollo. The connection between them can be seen, I believe, in the myth of the transmission of Pythian Apollo's prophetic

<sup>14</sup> SNG Ashmolean Museum, no. 222.

<sup>15</sup> Topalilov 2023.

powers to Kalchas, which also reflected in the oracle based at the sanctuary of Apollo at Kalchedon. This made Kalchedon the only Megarian *apoikia* with such a sanctuary.<sup>16</sup> When carrying out an expedition to establish a new *apoikia*, the leader of the *apokoi* from Kalchedon thus inquired about it not from Apollo at Delphi, as was the main practice, but from the oracle at Kalchedon, which had the power to sanction such initiatives. This not only significantly shortened the preparation period for an expedition, which would take months when using the sanctuary at Delphi, but also allowed Kalchedon to control the process to some extent and even play the role of metropolis in some cases. Certainly, the proposed interpretation of the image on the obverse of the obols and drachma in question would be possible with the clarification that in this case the inclusion of the eyes is not a mistake of the engraver or a blind imitation of a typical iconographic type in West Asian coinage from the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC onwards.



**Fig. 4.** Kalchedon, AR Hemidrachma, 2.35 g.

*Obv.* Youth head facing left; *Rev.* Wheel of four spokes within shallow circular incuse. (Emporium Hamburg, e-Auction 521, Lot 9, Date: 14.08.2015)

It is logical to assume that the coins bearing the image of the historical *oikist* were minted after his death and are associated with the establishment of his cult and myth. Despite the precedent of honoring the *oikist* in his lifetime, we currently have no arguments for such a process in Messambria. Through the establishment of the cult of the historical *oikist* and the development of the foundation myth, the *apoikia* gained its identity among other Hellenic cities already associated with its founder and become a *politeia*.

The *oikist* himself is represented on coins wearing a helmet, i.e. with military clothing that can be interpreted in at least two ways. On the one hand, the image can be read in the context of the traditional perception of the Founder as a military leader who founded the *apoikia* after the breaking of fierce resistance posed by local tribes. This is unlikely in Messambria's case since on the basis of archaeological data and literary sources the

<sup>16</sup> Robu 2007, 143–146.

city's foundation cannot be connected with a victorious military initiative against local Thracian tribes; the latter were simply not in this area, and as M. Lazarov concludes the *apoikia* was founded on vacant land.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps, then, the militaristic coin imagery follows a convention rather than real events.

If the image of the *oikist* in military attire should be connected with a specific historical event and military action, then this could be the successful expansion of Messambria's *chora* into the Thracian lands, which probably led to the acquisition of the silver mines that were used for the minting of Messambria's silver coinage. Indeed, archaeological studies and coins reveal the inclusion of lands northwest of Messambria along the Hadjiyska River into the *politeia*'s orbit when the coin issues were dated or shortly before.<sup>18</sup> In this case, the historical *oikist* is presented as continuing his work of strengthening Messambria after the arrival of the second wave of colonists, who radically changed the *apoikia*'s appearance into that of a *politeia*.

The image of the historical *oikist* on Messambrian coinage is found at least until the second half/end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century or the very beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, as the following issue of silver obols suggests (Fig. 5):



**Fig. 5.** Messambria, AR Obol, 10 × 8 mm, 0.55 g.

*Obv.* Corinthian helmet with transverse crest facing and dots in the apertures for the eyes;  
*Rev.* Wheel of four spokes with a tetraskelion or swastika in each quarter.<sup>19</sup> (Nomos, Auction 13, Lot 156, Date: 7.10.2016)

The minting of these obols is probably indicative both of the popularity of this type of iconography in urban coinage and of the importance—and perhaps ideological potency—of the historical *oikist*'s cult and foundation myth. It would be difficult but not impossible to accept that the historical *oikist* lived as long as the period of the alleged

<sup>17</sup> Lazarov 1998, 94. On the results of the archaeological excavations, see Gjuzelev 2009, 78–85; Bozhkova 2009, 146–147.

<sup>18</sup> Topalilov 2021a, 98.

<sup>19</sup> SNG BM Black Sea, No. 267.

coinage was issued, given the stretched dating of the issues by the scholars. By the time these obols appeared, however, silver obols bearing the image of the Corinthian helmet (represented frontally on their obverse) which have no analogue in the Hellenic coinage had also appeared (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6. Messambria, AR Obol, 7 mm, 0.58 g.

Obv. Corinthian helmet facing; Rev. Quadripartite incuse square.

(Classical Numismatic Group, Inc., Electronic Auction 420, Lot 18, Date: 9.05.2018)

There is no doubt in my mind that one of the basic postulates of the *polis* doctrine is thus represented, namely the relationship between the *polis* and Homeric epic as J. Hind aptly admitted.<sup>20</sup> The similarities between the faces on the obols under consideration together with their direct engagement with official *polis* ideology leads me to suggest that the basis for the elaboration of the παράσημον of the city with a frontally represented Corinthian helmet was precisely the iconographic type of the historical *oikist* already familiar in the local community. The only change that was undertaken, along with the updating of the Corinthian helmet itself, was the removal of the dots in the helmet's openings that formerly indicated eyes. In this way, the new image would have been more easily recognizable and acceptable by all groups of the Messambrian society and those of the region where Messambrian coins circulated. The image therefore would have more easily indicated the continuation of the *oikist*'s work as part of the ideology enshrined in *polis* political doctrine. The lack of a legend to explain the image would in turn indicate the recognizability of the image in local society.

The identification of the historical *oikist* is still debatable. I. Karayotov assumes that he may have been the Thracian Melsas or a Dorian aristocrat, a citizen of Byzantium or Kalchedon who was also the leader of the ἄποικοι for these polities.<sup>21</sup> In the context of the above, it is difficult to accept the thesis that the historical *oikist* was

<sup>20</sup> Hind 2007, 23–24.

<sup>21</sup> Karayotov 2007a, 356; 2008, 229.

Melsas. It is possible that this was Menas to whom Strabo refers and whose name is accepted in a considerable part of modern historiography as a corrupt form of Melsas, especially since the name Menas became widespread in the Hellenic world and especially in Megara and the region of Delphi.<sup>22</sup> The assumption of I. Karayotov that the *oikist* was a Dorian aristocrat is logical, given the existing written sources. Thus, Pseudo-Skymnos,<sup>23</sup> Eustathius<sup>24</sup> and Herodotus,<sup>25</sup> and Strabo<sup>26</sup> point to the Dorian milieu from which they believe the colonists came (Kalchedon, Byzantium, and Megara).

There is also the possibility that the *oikist*, and the group of colonists he brought with him, had an Ionian background. There are at least two arguments for this supposition. There is first the use of the sampi **T** in the name of the *politeia*, already represented in the legends of coin issues in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. Sampi is known to have been used in the Ionian context of the Asia Minor coast<sup>27</sup> but not by the Dorians, suggesting an Ionian character for the name of the *politeia* Messambria rather than a Dorian or Megarian one. In fact, it is already suggested that the use of T (sampi) in the name of Messambria should be seen as an Ionic influence from neighboring Apollonia<sup>28</sup> which may not be so due to the fact that Kalchedon presumably received its alphabet from the Milesian colonies around her.<sup>29</sup> As for the second argument, accepting an Ionian character of the first settlers could explain the lack of opposition from the Ionian colonies already founded in the region, located to the south and north at Apollonia and Odessos, respectively. Otherwise, their passivity remains incomprehensible and unusual, all the more so since on other similar occasions in the history of Hellenic colonization, a fierce struggle between two different Hellenic groups is known. Such conflict often entailed the services of local tribes and rulers.

Possible connections between the early coins of Messambria and those of Apollonia<sup>30</sup> lend credence to the idea that Messambria was founded by Ionians. Since no architectural remains were found among the archaeological material found on the peninsula in Nessebar and the surrounding area until the second quarter of 5<sup>th</sup> century BC,<sup>31</sup> early Messambria does not seem to have been founded as an *apoikia*, but instead as a temporary (perhaps seasonally inhabited) settlement that involved in trade between local Thracian tribes and inhabitants of Apollonia (*katoikia*). This may be the reason for using ‘βρία’ in the meaning that is suggested by the Alexandrian lexicographer Hesychios as ‘agricultural settlement’ or simply ‘settlement’ in the title of the *apoikia*.<sup>32</sup> We can suggest that a formal colony was settled only in 497 BC, when, according to Eustathius, settlers from Kalchedon

<sup>22</sup> The text is Strabo 7.6.1 that will be discussed below.

<sup>23</sup> GGM 1, Skymn. 738–742.

<sup>24</sup> Eustath. ad Dionys. 803.

<sup>25</sup> Hdt. 6.33.2.

<sup>26</sup> Strabo 7.6.1.

<sup>27</sup> Jeffrey 1961, 366.

<sup>28</sup> Dechev 1954, 367. *Contra* Jeffrey 1961, 368.

<sup>29</sup> Jeffrey 1990, 366.

<sup>30</sup> Topalov 2007.

<sup>31</sup> Bozkova – Kiyashkina 2015, 77.

<sup>32</sup> *IGBulg.* I<sup>2</sup>, 257; Alexandrescu – Morintz 1982, 4.



and Byzantium settled the place while fleeing advancing military forces of the Persian satrap Otan. Perhaps as Herodotus contends, this development occurred a few years later in 493 BC. Given the extreme situation, it seems that these settlers knew exactly where they were going, and Kalchedon's oracle could have sanctioned their expedition in a short period of time.

The foundation of a temporary settlement of a commercial character is probably the case of the foundation mentioned by Pseudo-Skymnos, who dates the initiative to the time of the Scythian campaign of Darius I. This development as well as one or both of the expeditions of fleeing Kalchedonians and Byzantines in 497 BC and 493 BC are probably the basis of the tradition that Strabo presents for the beginning of the *politieia*:

εἶτα τὸ Αἴμιον ὄρος μέχρι τῆς δευρο θαλάττης διῆκον: εἶτα Μεσημβρία Μεγαρέων ἄποικος, πρότερον δὲ Μενεβρία, οἶον Μένα πόλις, τοῦ κτίσαντος Μένα καλουμένου, τῆς δὲ πόλεωςβρίας καλουμένης θρακιστί:

then Mesembria, a colony of the Megarians, formerly called 'Menebria' (that is, 'city of Menas,' because the name of its founder was Menas, while 'bria' is the word for 'city' in the Thracian language. In this way, also, the city of Selys is called Selymbria and Aenus was once called Poltymbria).<sup>33</sup>

The archaeological excavations on the peninsula of Nessebar, where Messambria was located, show that the colony acquired its architectural appearance at the earliest only in the second quarter of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, i.e. after the settlement of the colonists from Byzantium and Kalchedon. It was also at this time that the first issues of coinage appeared: the aforementioned silver obols and drachma. The colony seems to have received a significant boost in its political, economic, and demographic development through the infusion of new colonists. However, this does not, in my view, warrant the idea proposed in the literature that Messambria was founded twice,<sup>34</sup> even in the unlikely case of an additional infusion of settlers. Besides, the infusion of additional settlers, which is a frequent element in the process of the foundation and establishment of Hellenic colonies, is not usually interpreted as a 'double foundation.' The best example of this in the case of Thrace is Abdera, which was founded by colonists from Clazomenae led by Timesius around 654 BC. Between 546–542 BC, it further became home to colonists from Teos near Clazomenae, who were no doubt well-informed by their neighbours about the possibilities for settling in Aegean Thrace.<sup>35</sup>

The possibility of the Ionians coming to the peninsula first, either from Ionia in flight from a Persian advance or from neighboring Apollonia to take advantage of the vacuum left by the Persian army's retreat and weakened local Thracian tribes to found a new trading post, gives reason to see in the figure of the historical *oikist* an Ionian elite and not a Dorian Kalchedonian one. Considering the possible parallel this would establish with the cult of the historical *oikist* Timesius in Abdera, which was preserved after the arrival

<sup>33</sup> Strabo 7.6.1; trans. Jones 1924.

<sup>34</sup> Nawotka 1997, 27. *Contra* Oppermann 2004, 16, note 121.

<sup>35</sup> See most recently in Adak – Thonemann 2022, 82.

of the Teians,<sup>36</sup> we could hypothetically assume that the obverse of the earliest silver Mesambrian obols represents the leader of the Ionians who arrived in the peninsulas before the Dorians. However, what stops me from fully accepting this idea is the nature of the first pre-colonial settlement, which has been elucidated through archaeological excavations. It seems that the coming of the Ionians (Apollonians?) was not related to an intention to colonize the area.<sup>37</sup> Instead, their settlement was temporary and related to the implementation of trade with local Thracian tribes.

In this situation we cannot assume the implementation of the standard colonization process. In contrast to the wave of colonists from Kalchedon and Byzantion, whose expedition and leader may have been sanctioned by the oracle of Apollo at Kalchedon, the expedition from Apollonia would be quite different. It does not presuppose such official sanctioning and the acquisition of *oikist* status by the expedition leader. This means that the cult of the founder of Mesambria and the city's foundation myth should be associated not with an Ionian leader but with a Dorian one, the consequence of whose activities was the founding of the *apoikia* itself and its conversion into a *politeia* a bit later, in the second quarter of 5<sup>th</sup> c. at latest with the arrivals of the temporary settlers which is described by Herodotus. This determined the future development of Messambria as a Doric and not Ionian city. If this reasoning is correct, we should assume that the obverse of the obols and drachma under consideration above represents a Dorian, in this case most probably Kalchedonian, expedition leader. The following obol is probably evidence for this interpretation, showing on the reverse the Doric representation of the name of the *politeia*, i.e. by ΜΕΣ(αμβρία), rather than by the Ionian ΜεΤα(μβρία) (Fig. 7).

Despite a displacement of local Ionians by Dorians, however, we cannot conclude that Messambria became an exclusively Doric city by the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. It is likely that many of the settlers from Kalchedon and Byzantion returned to their homeland by 478–477 BC or shortly thereafter,<sup>38</sup> which would have weakened the Doric element in Messambrian society. The Ionian 'vein' of Messambria's population was nevertheless preserved, and we can detect it again in the legends of the Messambrian coins, where the name of the *politeia* is represented in abbreviated form as ΜΕΤΑ (ΜεΤαμβρία = Μεσσαμβρία). For the moment, this form is attested earliest in a silver obol whose minting is dated to the middle/second half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC (Fig. 8).

<sup>36</sup> Hdt. 1. 168: Φωκαΐης μὲν νῦν πέρι τῆς ἐν Ἰωνίῃ οὕτω ἔσχε παραπλήσια δὲ τούτοισι καὶ Τηῖοι ἐποίησαν. ἐπεὶ γὰρ σφέων εἴλε χώματι τὸ τεῖχος Ἄρπαγος, ἐσβάντες πάντες ἐς τὰ πλοῖα οἰχοντοπλέοντες ἐπὶ τῆς Θρηκίης, καὶ ἐνθαῦτα ἔκτισαν πόλιν Ἄβδηρα, τὴν πρότερος τούτων Κλαζομένιος Τιμήσιος κτίσας οὐκ ἀπόνητο, ἀλλ' ὑπὸ Θρηκίων ἐξελασθεὶς τιμὰς νῦν ὑπὸ Τηίων τῶν ἐν Ἀβδήροισι ὡς ἦρος ἔχει.

'Thus, then, it went with the Ionian Phocaea. The Teians did the same things as the Phocaeans: when Harpagus had taken their walled city by building an earthwork, they all embarked aboard ship and sailed away for Thrace. There they founded a city, Abdera, which before this had been founded by Timesius of Clazomenae; yet he got no profit of it, but was driven out by the Thracians. This Timesius is now honored as a hero by the Teians of Abdera' (transl. Godley 1920).

<sup>37</sup> The early Archaic colonization is made with small groups of settlers, see Damyanov 2018, 248 which may have reflected on the small number of settlers that had reached the peninsula at Nessebar at the end of 6<sup>th</sup> century BC.

<sup>38</sup> Robu 2014, 313.



**Fig. 7.** Mesambria, AR Obol, 0.63 g., 9 mm.

*Obv.* Facing Corinthian helmet with dots in the apertures for the eyes; *Rev.* Four-spoked wheel, with tetraskelion or swastika in one angle and M - E - Σ in the rest. Numismatik Naumann (formerly Gitbud & Naumann), Auction 77, lot: 43, Date: 5.05.2019



**Fig. 8.** Mesambria, AR Obol, 8 × 9mm, 0.55 g.

*Obv.* Helmeted head of Athena left; *Rev.* Ethnic within quadripartite incuse square with META.<sup>39</sup> (Classical Numismatic Group, Inc., Auction 94, Lot 155, Date: 18.09.2013)

The depiction of Athena on this obol is associated with the strengthening of Athenian influence in Thrace, which logically led to a certain agitation in the internal political life of the Messambrian society between Ionian and Dorian groups. It is noteworthy, however, that displaying the name of the *politeia* as ΜΕΤΑ(μῆβρία) is not attested on issues on which the historical *oikist* is represented.

The participation of the descendants of Ionian Greeks in Messambrian society can also be traced in another way. It is logical to posit that the cult and myth of the historical

<sup>39</sup> Karayotov 1994, 18, pl. I, 1; Topalov 1995, 55–56.

*oikist* were established after his death, i.e., in the early years of life at Messambria. However, the silver drachma referred to above shows that the cult and myth of the mythical eponymous hero-founder was also established in the *politieia* in these early years. This drachma is for the moment the earliest notice of this cult, if of course the interpretation of the archaized image is correct. Unfortunately, nothing more can be said about his myth at this stage, but on the basis of his image, we might assume that the mythical *oikist*'s military successes, associated with the founding of the *politieia* and the subsequent expansion of its *chora*, are unlikely to underlie his conception. It is logical to assume that such a military campaign would be the basis of his myth, but perhaps given his appearance in the time of the militant historical *oikist*, he would more likely represent such a victory on the part of the colonists' ancestors, i.e. the Ionians, who first reached the peninsula. It is in this sense, in my opinion, that the archaizing manner of the image, that has no parallel in the Messambrian coinage, should be interpreted. Strabo's aforementioned note also points to a connection with the colonists' ancestors.

Following the rule, we should assume that Messambria's eponymous hero was called Messas/Mesas. And here we must recall Pliny the Elder's note:

nunc in ora Mesembria, Anchialum, ubi Messa fuerat.<sup>40</sup>

At the present day there are upon the coast Mesembria, and Anchialum, where Messa formerly stood.

It is possible that this note is an allusion to the cult and myth of the eponymous founder-hero of Messambria that endured at least until the time of Pliny the Elder. The change in the name of Messambria with the full replacement of Messambria by Mesambria (ΜΕΣΑ instead of ΜΕΣΣΑ) which occurred at the beginning of 2<sup>nd</sup> c. BC may reveal the end of the cult and myth to Messa and the increase (or establishment) of the cult to Melsas. The emergence of the cult of the founder Messa and his foundation myth from the very beginning of the *politieia* and its mention by Pliny the Elder, with whom the *politieia* herself is identified, shows unequivocally its great importance for Messambria's internal political life. This is logical given his neutral character: as a mythical eponymous hero, he could have been embraced by all ethnic and social groups in the *politieia* and thus would have united the heterogeneous society. We can only speculate why his cult emerged in the early years of the *politieia*'s life. However, given the specificity of Messambrian early history related to its foundation and the additional settling, albeit temporary, of colonists from Kalchedon and Byzantion, I would not hesitate to concede that by creating the cult of the mythical eponymous hero, the Ionians in Messambrian society conveyed their claim to the beginnings of the *politieia* in a way that the Dorian community could not have rejected. Otherwise, we would have to accept that the Dorian settlers of Kalchedon and Byzantion accepted an already existing cult for an Ionian historical *oikist*. The emergence of the cult and myth of the mythical eponymous hero-founder would therefore express their desire for a different, Dorian identity from that of the sites previous Ionian settlers. The eponymous founding hero would have been the only opportunity for Messambria's Dorian population to be accepted among the other Doric colonies as equals.

<sup>40</sup> Pliny, *NH* 4.18.

There is another possibility for the emergence of the cult and myth of the eponymous hero in Messambria. Literary sources and an epigraphic monument identify another eponymous hero named Melsas. Thus, Nicholas of Damascus at the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC, whose work is transmitted through Stephen of Byzantium, states that:

FGrH 90, fr. 43: s.v. Μεσημβρία, πόλις Ποντική. Νικόλαος πέμπτω. ἐκλήθη ἀπὸ Μέλσου. βρια γὰρ τὴν πόλιν φασὶ Θραῖκες. ὡς οὖν Σηλυμβρία ἢ τοῦ Σήλου πόλις, Πολτυμβρία ἢ Πόλτυος [πόλις], οὕτω Μεσημβρία ἢ Μέλσου πόλις, καὶ διὰ τὸ εὐφρονότερον λέγεται Μεσημβρία.

Mesembria, a Pontic city. Nikolaos (says so) in the fifth book. For Thracians say bria for city. As Selymbria is a city of Selys, Poltymbria a city of Poltys, so Mesembria is a city of Melsos, which is pronounced Mesembria on account of more pleasant sound.<sup>41</sup>

The notice is confirmed in a funeral epitaph from Messambria, which mentions the following:

Ἰουλία Νεικίου | θυγάτηρ μεγάλετορος ἀνδρός,  
Μεσεμβρία (sic) δέ μιν (sic) πατρὶς ἀπὸ [Μ]έλσα καὶ βρία<sup>42</sup>

Iulia daughter of Neikios a man of great heart.  
My hometown is Mesambria (whose name is derived) from Melsa and Bria.

These two notes make it possible to suppose that in fact the name Melsambria, which is associated with the Thracian Melsas, can be interpreted as the Thracian form of the name of the Hellenic colony. These attestations are the basis for the idea long held in Bulgarian historiography that an earlier Thracian settlement existed before the later Hellenic colony replaced it.<sup>43</sup> Archaeological excavations on the peninsula of Nessebar have even revealed the remains of an earlier settlement that dates to the Early Iron Age.<sup>44</sup> However, the archaeological excavations also clearly distinguish a hiatus of at least two centuries between the earlier Thracian settlement and the Hellenistic *apoikia*.<sup>45</sup> Accordingly, another Thracian settlement is posited to have been nearby to allow for this hypothesized continued inhabitation, and even the transfer of the city-name.<sup>46</sup> At this stage, this assumption finds no support in the archaeological data. It is necessary to mention the fact that, for reasons that are still unclear (in my opinion because of a natural cataclysm) the peninsula of Nessebar was abandoned for a period of time, which would have impacted the territory adjacent to the settlement.

The lack of continuity between the Hellenistic *apoikia* and an earlier Thracian settlement puts the problem of the Thracian Melsas on another plane. It is clear that he cannot be the founder of the pre-colonial settlement and so the founder of the Hellenic colony

<sup>41</sup> Nawotka 2021, 366.

<sup>42</sup> *IGBulg.* I<sup>2</sup>, 345, ll. 4–7.

<sup>43</sup> Preshlenov 2003, 164–165; Porozhanov 2000, 115–119; 2002, 220–221, 222; 2004, 514–521; Porožanov 2000, 345–350; Ognenova-Marinova 1982, 69–81; 1991, 134–136. K. Nawotka (1994, 320) even assumes: ‘continuation of the settlement pattern from the Thracian to the Greek phase of occupation.’

<sup>44</sup> Venedikov 1980, 7–22.

<sup>45</sup> Alexandrescu – Morintz 1982, 50–55; Bozhkova 2009, 143–144; Damyanov 2018, 249.

<sup>46</sup> Danov 1960, 75; Alexandrescu – Morintz 1982, 52; Lazarov 1998, 94.

itself. Therefore another option is sought; A. Robu suggests that, through the founding of the cult and the myth, the Hellenic settlers were able to integrate themselves into local mythical genealogies.<sup>47</sup> This was of particular importance for the budding *apoikia*'s foundation and its future prosperity.

I would like to draw attention to another possible interpretation of the connection between Melsa and naming the *politeia* Melsambria. The possibility has already been raised above that the cult and myth of Melsas was fabricated at a later time as mentioned above, probably at the very end of the fourth to the beginning of the third century. The three coin denominations with the name of Melsa known so far,<sup>48</sup> one of them is as follows (**Fig. 9**):



**Fig. 9.** ΜΕΛΣΑ coin

*Obv.* Filleted bucranium facing, within dotted border; *Rev.* Fish l.; below ΜΕΛΣΑ.  
(Solidus Numismatik, Auction 8, Lot 36, Date: 23.04.2016)

The ΜΕΛΣΑ coins circulated in the same area as Messambrian coins, the foundation of the Messambrian *polihinion* Bizone on the territory of the probable dynast/paradynast Melsas, and the new significance that the institution of the *oikist* had by this time already acquired, are the basis for assuming that the Melsas in question was in fact a local Thracian dynast/paradinast whose actions were perceived as those of an *oikist* by the Messambrian community, and that he was therefore honoured as such.<sup>49</sup> If this interpretation is correct, given the chronological scope of the coins we should exclude Melsas from discussion in this study, as his role in the life of Messambrians appears at a later stage.

This brief analysis allows me to suppose that the emergence of the cult and myth to the mythical eponymous founder of Messambria Messa can be linked to the internal politics of the *politeia* and more precisely to relations between Ionian and Dorian inhabitants of the city. It should be noted that this discourse did not necessarily entail antagonism,

<sup>47</sup> Robu 2014, 320.

<sup>48</sup> Topalov – Tachev 2012, 355–376.

<sup>49</sup> Topalilov 2021b. On Melsa coins, see also Topalov 1988; Karayotov 2004, 10; Stoyas 2012; 2021.

i.e. *stasis*. Indeed, according to Aristotle the settling of *epoikoi* in the neighboring Apollonia led to strife (*stasis*) and change in government.<sup>50</sup> At this time, available sources do not indicate conflict, although it is not impossible. In fact, given historical realities, this emergence was the most logical, thus joining Messambria's Ionian and Dorian populations into a new, stronger Messambrian society, ready to overcome difficult years ahead.

Many of the issues presented here are still subject to debate due to a lack of concrete data. Therefore, this study is preliminary, and some of the conclusions reached here may undergo corrections in subsequent publications. What is indisputable, however, is the fact that society in Messambria, along with that at Abdera and Byzantion, appreciated the extraordinary potential of the cult of the founder and foundation myth in political life and skillfully exploited it. The seeming lack of such initiative at other Hellenic colonies (e.g., Apollonia, Odessos, Tomis, etc.) may be a consequence of modern scholars' insufficient knowledge. Still, the actions of the Messambrian and Abderitic societies in this aspect clearly distinguish them from the rest in Thrace and make it possible to assume the existence of a closer relationship between them, which at this stage remains hypothetical.

## ABBREVIATIONS

- IGBulg.* P – G. I. Mihailov, *Inscriptiones graecae in Bulgaria Repertae*, vol. I: *Inscriptiones orae Ponti Euxini*, Sofia 1970.
- SNG Ashmolean Museum II – *Sylloge Nummorum Graecorum, Great Britain V: Ashmolean Museum, Oxford*: Part II: *Italy: Lucania (Thurium): Bruttium: Sicily: Carthage*, London 1969.
- SNG BM Black Sea – *Sylloge Nummorum Graecorum [Great Britain] IX: The British Museum, Part I: The Black Sea*, London 1993.

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<sup>50</sup> Arist. *Pol.* 5.3.1303a; 5.6.1306a.

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