

## An Unknown Small-Denomination Coin from Messambria of the

**Type „Head of Dionysus with a grape“ (115/105 – 72/71 BC), with the Countermark „Cancer“, used around the middle of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC in Apollonia Pontica**

*By Stavri Topalov*

Ever since I started my collection, I set for myself the objective of tracking down, acquiring and researching coins minted by Thracian kings and coins minted in Thrace during the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC. I paid special attention to coins minted at the three major ancient cities located in present-day Bulgaria, namely Apollonia, Messambria and Odesos.

I started publishing the results from my first studies in Thracian minting and history in the early 1970s as part of the educational and exhibition activities of the Numismatic Society of Sofia. At the time, it hosted monthly lectures on the history of the Thracian lands, which were attended by some of the most prominent Bulgarian scholars, collectors and citizens interested in the topic. One of the first lectures, delivered by Professor Hristo Danov, covered historical records related to Messambria and The Black Sea. As a person in charge of the educational and exhibition activities at the Society, I organized displays of coins related to the subject of the lectures. These were kindly provided by private collectors. In most cases, the collector whose coins were featured in the display made a brief presentation of the coins provided by them. The lectures delivered by scholars and the brief presentations by collectors were archived and preserved by the Numismatic Society for further use in leaflets, magazines and collected works distributed among collectors' clubs across the country. As a result, we managed to print about a dozen mimeographic leaflets and three medleys featuring lectures read by scholars. For reasons that are still unknown to me, the presentations by collectors were not published although the medleys had been put together. Some of these presentations later appeared in other educational and promotional materials of the Society, which were made available to all the other numismatic organizations in Bulgaria. Many years have passed since the numismatic organizations stopped holding this long-tenured educational and exhibition activity (we organized more than 100 regional and national exhibitions, many cultural exhibits and even a three-month exhibit of ancient and medieval coins abroad), yet, I would like to use this introduction to object the negative attitudes towards the work of several dozen Bulgarian members of more than 100 numismatic societies in the country, and to praise them for their willingness to volunteer their own numismatic artifacts for exhibitions and for their own research into ancient and medieval coins that are currently outside of museum collections. Collectors with decidedly scientific

interest in coins from this period gradually transitioned from making brief popular reports to publishing more substantial studies on coin minting and the history of the lands of ancient Thrace. For example, I would like to point out that three of the participants in this early educational activity, who are also members of the Numismatic Society, have so far published nearly 450 articles in scientific magazines and have self-published 56 studies, monographies and catalogues. The contributions of several dozen other collectors with pronounced scientific interests, who also published articles, studies and monographies should also be recognized as significant.

Unfortunately, it has to be noted that since 1989, as a result of a policy shift on the part of the state with regard to researching and safeguarding cultural heritage, there are no real possibilities for Bulgarian citizens to collect antique and medieval coins and in doing so to promote direct and sustained interest in the historical past of the lands we call home. Numismatic organizations were not supported in their activities, which led to them losing their clubhouses and the ability to do organizational and educational work and organize exhibits. The tradition of forming youth sections comprising high school and university students was discontinued. As a consequence of this, currently the collector community has been relegated to a handful of long-time collectors of an advanced age. Citizens and collectors of antique and medieval coins were not properly informed of the introduction of mandatory declaration and registration and were not given a reasonable timetable to declare and register the cultural heritage items in their possession. Consequently, only about 60 numismatic collections were declared and partially registered. As was mentioned above, prior to 1989 there were several dozen members of numismatic collections who had their own coin collections. Currently, only very few of these collections have been preserved and studied. For the rest of them, there is probably no information as to even what became of them.

With that out of the way, let me shed some light on the path my research in coin-minting and the history of Messambria took, and, possibly, my latest contributions to the subject, which has to do with the publication of a heretofore unknown, small-denomination bronze coin minted in the city but carrying a rare countermark of Apollonia, a neighboring city of Messambria. The rest of my research followed an approximately similar path (more than 400 articles and reports and 34 studies and monographies) but should mention the dismissive attitude of some of the researchers employed by state-run institutions toward the work of regular Bulgarians, who according to them did not have the required educational background. As someone who was responsible for the educational, expert and exhibition activities carried out in numismatic societies in the country for a significant amount of time, I can say that many collectors with scientific interests faced similar challenges and attitudes.

In addition to the presentations given at numismatic societies and the exhibitions of Messambria coins from my collection I helped organize, by 1990 I had prepared for print four articles that were nominated for publication in *Numismatica* magazine. After a prolonged delay, two of them were printed in 1988 and 1991. As I later found out, the delay and non-publication of these studies was due to the fact that member of the journal's editorial board had been preparing a dissertation paper on coin-minting in Messambria. Two of my four articles did not appear until after the dissertation was defended. Because I believed the new numismatic material I

researched and submitted for publication as well as my study of it would make an essential contribution to the way we perceived coin-minting in Messambria, especially with the countermarked coins of the city, I decided to combine these articles into a small monography and a catalog of known coins attributed to the city's mints. I leaned on the texts of the articles as they were and, aiming to publish the results of my studies as soon as possible, I did not present in the most complete and comprehensive way my views on coin-minting in Messambria in this monograph published in 1995. I made the necessary additions in 1997 regarding the countermarking of coins from the West Pontic cities, and also in the sequel monograph published in 2002. In some of my subsequent studies, I presented new coin types and countermarks of Messambria, as well as the new conclusions drawn from them about coin-minting and the history of the city. To my knowledge, no research carried out by Bulgarian scholars employed at state-run institutions and museums has ever referenced the new types of Messambria coins published by me, nor have been the new ideas and views I have proposed in my work. It even came to a point where a coin that was first published by me, which turned out to be of crucial importance for how we view the dawn of coin-minting in the city, was not presented with reference to its first-ever publication. Instead, the author offered a long-winded explanation of how they came across a photo of the coin by accident, how they tracked down the photographer and how they learned from him that the coin was discovered in Bulgaria. The author then went on to explain how he researched the coin from the photo and to lay out the conclusions he had reached. Only then did the author mention that the coin „had attracted the attention of the collector Stavri Topalov from Sofia” but neglected to say that this particular collector (who had earned his doctorate in the field a long time ago) was the one who published it for the first time along with other similar heretofore unknown small-denomination early coins, which, at the time, scholars did not even differentiate from mass-minted silver coins from Messambria. It was based on this Sofia collector's pioneering study of these very early coins of the city, that some new conclusions were drawn, which changed considerably the way we view the beginnings of coin-minting in Messambria. Until now, this and many other cases like it have been left outside the conversation by Bulgarian researchers in the field. If I have not addressed this approach, which many researchers have tended to prefer over the past several decades, it was because I believe in the staying power of the written word and that sooner or later the necessary parallels will be drawn and the right conclusions will be made. If there was interest for that, of course.

Let us proceed with the presentation of the research into the unknown, small-denomination bronze coin of the bust-of-Dionysus/grape cluster type Messambria. Here, I will lean on the original text of the article I submitted for publication in 1985 to *Numismatica* magazine entitled „Which Messambria minted the coins of the type „Head of Dionysus with a grape“?, article published in 1988 (*Topalov, 1988, 27-34*). In this study, I researched all historical records that were available at the time that could shed light on which settlement from Antiquity was responsible for minting these coins. This was the first study of this kind and in it I laid out a series of arguments in favor of Messambria on the Black Sea. While at the time I used only one coin per type as illustration, here I will present all of my coins from every type and I will adhere to the texts and photos from the declarations for my coin

collection (*stmes „Autonomous coins from Messambria“ section, the Topalov Collection*).

We know of two settlements from Antiquity that had the name of Messambria, the large polis on the Black Sea coast and a small fortified settlement on the coast of the Aegean Sea (*Danov, 1968, 242, 247*). The considerable disparity in the economic and political power yielded by the two Messambrias gave pre-1900s scholars reasons to believe that all coins with the inscription Messambria on them came from the city on the Black Sea.

In 1900, D. Tachella published one coin of the type „Head of Dionysus with a grape“, that was discovered in Bulgaria and proposed that these coins were minted in Messambria on the Aegean Sea, because the cult to Dionysus was prevalent in the area whereas it was largely not practised in the area of Messambria on the Black Sea (*Tachella, 1900, 258*).

This new theory was supported by B. Head, A. Bablon, D. Hill, N. Mushmov and W. Schwabacher. Later, when he published a coin with a similar countermark, B. Schwabacher changed his mind and proposed that this type of coins was minted in Messambria on the Black Sea (*Schwabacher, 1942, 97*).

In 1946, T. Gerasimov did not share B. Schwabacher's conviction and sided with the thenpopular opinion that the source of these coins was Messambria on the Aegean Sea. Later research by Bulgarian scholars also suggested that coins of the type „Head of Dionysus with a grape“ were not minted in Messambria on the Black Sea (*Gerasimov, 1950, 29-30; Draganov, 1980, 715*). In his dissertation paper entitled „Coin-Minting in Messambria during the Hellenic Period (250-72/71 BC)“, Ivan Karayotov uses only one sentence to mention the existence of coins of the type „Head of Dionysus with a grape“, which some scholars attributed to Messambria on the Aegean Sea while others, to Messambria Pontica. He does not even include them in his presentation or the catalogue of Messambria coins in his dissertation paper (*Karayotov, 1985*). Yet, he describes them as being minted in Messambria on the Black Sea in his later publications (*Karayotov, 1992, 47; Karayotov, 1995; Karayotov, 2009*), i.e. after the publication of my article in *Numismatica* magazine (*Topalov, 1988, 27-34*).

In that article, I offered a number of arguments for Messambria on the Black Sea being the source of these „Head of Dionysus with a grape“ type coins. Of those, I would mention here the fact that no such coins have ever been found in the Aegean Sea region (at my request, the curator of the Numismatic Office in Athens, Professor Turatsoglu, who was aware of my research before it was even published, corroborated this fact in a letter dated 08. 12. 1985) (for more information on the subject, see *Topalov, 1988, 27-34; Topalov, 1995, 28-43, 99-101, 107-118*).

As part of the same study, I published a bronze coin of the type „Head of Dionysus with a grape“, with an unusually large core and peculiar representation of the head of Dionysus. According to my research, the head looks similar to those on late series of tetradrachms from Messambria of the type „Head of Heracles/Zeus on a throne“. There, Heracles is represented with portrait features of Mithridates VI. Until that time, there was no record of such a series of coins being minted (*Topalov, 1988, 28-29; Topalov, 1995, 31-32*).

Thus far, when other researchers have commented on this type of coins, none of them has remarked who published those first and who first came to the conclusion that the head of Dionysus has portrait features belonging to Mithridates VI. In rare

exceptions, scholars have cited research that do not present the theory that the head of Dionysus has portrait features of Mithridates VI, but only repeats the known fact that the head of Heracles on some of the late series of Alexandrian tetradrachms minted in Western European cities has the portrait features of the Pontic ruler.

I will begin by presenting all the tetrachalkon coins of the type „Head of Dionysus with a grape“, found in my collection of Messambria coins (*stmes Section „Autonomous coins of Messambria“ from the Topalov Collection*).

### **1.0. Bronze octochalkon coins from Messambria of the type „Head of Dionysus, likely having the portrait features of Mithridates VI MESAM/BRIANWN, with a grape“**

#### **General description of the coin type**

Obverse: Youthful head of Dionysus with an ivy wreath on the right side. The Dionysus head probably shares portrait features of Mithridates VI.

Reverse: MESAM (vertical right) BRIANWN (vertical left). A grape between the parts of the inscription, two vine leaves above and another vine leaf underneath the grape. In some series there is a letter, in others, no letters.

1.1. The Topalov coin collection. Inscription MESAM/BRIANWN. Letter E to the left of the grape. The head of Dionysus has portrait features of Mithridates VI, similar to late tetradrachms from Messambria. Well preserved images and inscription. Place of discovery: Burgas Province. Weight 11,33 g, Diameter 22-23 mm, thickness 4,5 mm, image 1.1



Photo scale 1:1, image 1.1  
Published in Topalov, 1988, 27-34; Topalov, 1995, 99.

### **2.0 Bronze octochalkon coins from Messambria of the type „Head of Dionysus, MESAM/BRIANWN, with a grape“**

#### **General description of the coin type**

Obverse: Youthful head of Dionysus wearing an ivy wreath on the right side of the head. Slightly barbarized style.

Reverse: MESAM (vertical right) BRIANWN (vertical left). A grape between the parts of the inscription with a whole grape leaf underneath. Letter D to the left of the handle of the grape, letter W to the right.

2.1 The Topalov coin collection. Inscription MESAM/BRIANWN. Letters D/W above the grape. Very well preserved images and inscription. Dark patina. Place of discovery: unknown. Weight 6,48 g, Diameter 20 mm, thickness 3,5 mm, image 2.1.



Photo scale 1:1, image 2.1  
Published by Topalov, 1988, 2734; Topalov, 1995, 100, 1

2.2 The Topalov coin collection. Inscription MESAM/BRIANWN. Letters D/W above the grape. Very well preserved images and inscription. Light-green patina. Place of discovery: near Nesebar.

Weight 7,89 g, Diameter 21-22 mm, thickness 4,0 mm, image 2.2



Photo scale 1:1, image 2.2  
Published by Topalov, 1988, 27-34; Topalov, 1995, 100, 2.

2.3 The Topalov coin collection. Inscription MESAM/BRIANWN. Letters D/W above the grape. Poorly preserved images and inscription. Dark patina. Place of discovery: Varna Province. Weight 5,85 g, Diameter 20 mm, thickness 3,0 mm, image 2.3



Photo scale 1:1, image 2.3  
Published by Topalov, 1988, 27-34; Topalov, 1995, 3.

2.4 The Topalov coin collection. Inscription MESAM/BRIANWN. Letters D/W above the grape. Poorly preserved images and inscription. Dark patina. Place of discovery: unknown. Weight 6,92 g, Diameter 19,5-21 mm, thickness 3,5 mm, image 2.4



Photo scale 1:1, image 2.4

**3.0 Bronze octochalkon coins from Messambria of the type „Head of Dionysus with a grape“, with round city countermark of a „Head of Demetra“, placed over the head of Dionysus to denote mintage during the reign of the Pontic ruler in Messambria. These became common currency in the city during the Roman dominion over the western coast of the Black Sea.**

**General description of the coin type**

Obverse: Round countermark, „Head of Demetra to the right” on the head of Dionysus on coin from Messambria of the type „Head of Dionysus with a grape“.

Reverse: Evidence of inscription MESAM/BRIANWN and an image of a grape cluster and vine leaves. Magistrate monogram D/W.

3.1 The Topalov coin collection. Round countermark „Head of Demetra”, 8.0 mm in diameter over the lower portion of the head of Dionysus. Well preserved image and countermark. Because the core was deformed during the countermarking process, on the reverse side the upper portion of the inscription and the image of the grape cluster are completely preserved. Green patina. Place of discovery: Burgas Province.

Weight 5,25 g, Diameter 20 mm, thickness 3,0 mm, image 3.1



Photo scale 1:1,  
image 3.1  
Published by  
Topalov, 1997, 83.

3.2 The Topalov coin collection. Round countermark „Head of Demetra”, 8,0 mm in diameter on the lower section of the head of Dionysus. Well preserved image and countermark. Because the core was deformed during the countermarking process, on the reverse side the upper portion of the inscription and the grape cluster are preserved completely. Green patina. Place of discovery: Burgas Province.

Weight 6,21g, Diameter 22-22,5 mm, thickness 3,3 mm, image 3.2



Photo scale 1:1, image 3.2

3.3 The Topalov coin collection. Round countermark „Head of Demetra”, 8,0 mm in diameter on the lower section of the head of Dionysus. Well preserved image and countermark. Because the core was deformed during the countermarking process, on the reverse side the upper portion of the inscription and the grape cluster are preserved completely. A transverse line across the vine of the grape cluster makes the monogram D/W look like DTW. Green patina. Place of discovery: Burgas Province.

Weight 6,91 g, Diameter 19,5-21 mm, thickness 4,0 mm, image 3.3



Photo scale 1:1, image 3.3

**4.0 Bronze octochalkon coins from Messambria, of the type „Head of Dionysus with a grape“, with round city countermarks „Helmet with mane to the left“ or „Head of Demetra“, featuring on the head of Dionysus, indicating that minting took place during the reign of the Pontic ruler of Messambria. These became common currency in the city during the Roman dominance in the region of the western coast of the Black Sea.**

#### **General description of the coin type**

Obverse: Round countermarks featuring „Corinthian helmet to the left” and „Head of Demetra to the right” on the head of Dionysus from coin of Messambria of the type „Head of Dionysus with a grape“.

Reverse: Remnants of an inscription MESAM/BRIANWN and an image of a grape cluster with leaves.

4.1 The Topalov coin collection. Round countermark „Helmet with mane to the left”, placed in the center of the head of Dionysus and round countermark „Head of Demetra”, placed in the lower section of the head of Dionysus. Well preserved image and countermarks on the face side. Because the core was deformed during the countermarking process, only portions of the inscription and image have been preserved on the reverse side. Dark-green patina. Place of discovery: Burgas Province.

Weight 5,19 g, Diameter 20,521,5 mm, thickness 3,0 mm, image 4.1.



Photo scale 1:1, image 4.1



4.2 The Topalov coin collection. Round countermark „Helmet with mane to the left” I the fore section of the head of Dionysus and round countermark „Head of Demetra” on the back portion of the head of Dionysus. Well preserved image and countermarks on the obverse side. Because the core was deformed during the countermarking process, only fragments of the inscription and the image have been preserved on the reverse side. Dark-green patina. Place of discovery: Burgas Province.

Weight 7,48 g, Diameter 21,522,5mm, thickness 3,5 mm, image 4.2.



Photo scale 1:1,  
image 4.2  
Published by  
Topalov, 1995,  
110.

**5.0 Bronze octochalkon coins from Messambria, of the type „Head of Dionysus with a grape“, with round city countermarks „Helmet with mane to the left” and „Head of Demetra” placed on the head of Dionysus to indicate minting during the reign of the Pontic ruler in Messambria and the fact that the coins became common currency in the city during the Roman dominion of the region of the western coast of the Black Sea. The same coin was re-minted in Dionysopolis as a coin of type „The head of city-goddess Demetra, sitting on a throne holds patera“**

#### **General Description of the Coin Type**

Obverse: Bust of city goddess wearing city crown. The contours of images and countermarks of the original coin from Messambria are clearly discernible despite re-minting. If turned 180 degrees, the contours of the face and hair of Dionysus adorned with an ivy wreath on the right are visible. In the lower portion of the head of Dionysus (where the eye and nose of the city goddess are) there is a round countermark 8 mm in diameter featuring „Head of Demetra to the right“. In the back upper section of the head of Dionysus there is a larger section of a round countermark visible. Its diameter is 8 mm and it features „Helmet with mane to the left“.

Reverse: ISIO (fragment of the inscription DIONUSIO) (vertical, top-to-bottom in the right field). Demetra, wearing an opulently decorated dress, sits facing left on a throne with legs shaped to resemble lion's feet. She is holding a patera in her left hand and her right hand rests on a semicircular object slightly behind her (possibly drum (?)). Horizontal line. Under the horizontal line there is an inscription DIONUSOU. The inscriptions and the image are placed in a large hollow circle. If

turned to 120 degrees, the letters BRIAN part of the inscription MESAM/BRIANWN of the original re-minted coin become clearly discernible.

5.1 The Topalov coin collection. Round countermark „Helmet with mane to the left”, placed in the center of the head of Dionysus and round countermark „Head of Demetra”, placed in the lower section of the head of Dionysus. The latter is barely discernible as a result of re-minting and the fact that the image is almost completely transformed into a bust of a city goddess. Relatively well preserved image of the city patron goddess and countermarks on the obverse side. Because the core was deformed when placing the two countermarks on the back, no features of the original coin from Messambria are visible on the reverse side. The back features only fragments from the inscription and the image of the sitting Demetra from the Dionysopolis coin. Dark-green patina.

Place of discovery: Varna Province.

Weight 6,99 g, Diameter 22,524 mm, thickness 3,5 mm, image 5.1.



Photo scale 1:1,  
Published by

image 5.1  
Topalov, 1997, 85-86.

During my long career as a coin collector, I have had the chance to look at and acquire only one, small-denomination bronze coin from Messambria of the bust-of-Dionysus/grape cluster type. Based on the size of its core and the surviving fragments of the image on the obverse side, it can be identified as having been minted in Messambria as a dichalkon in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC. There are many octochalkon coins that feature virtually the same image of the head of Dionysus as this dichalkon, which indicates that all of them originated from one and the same minting house, namely that of Messambria on the Black Sea.

Coin description and photos.

Obverse: Youthful bust of Dionysus with characteristic hair style adorned with an ivy wreath. In the lower portion of the image, on his beard, there is a round countermark „cancer”.

Reverse: remnants of a fine, illegible inscription and image, that likely represents a grape cluster. Because of the small size of its core and the considerable force applied during the countermarking process, it is impossible to offer a more detailed description of the obverse side of the coin.



Photo scale 1:1  
Photo scale 2:1, image 6.1

The Topalov Coin Collection. Place of discovery: Burgas Region. Denomination: dichalcon. Weight: 1,41 g, Diameter 1415mm., thickness 2,0 mm., image 6.1

The stylistics of the image of the head of Dionysus, apart from the mass-minted octochalkon coins, are reminiscent of those of the chalcon coins of the „Front-facing helmet – four-spoke wheel” type and the „Head of Athina – pelta” type, which have the characteristic low embossing and were minted during the same period.

The round „cancer” countermark became known from the coins found at the Apollonia necropolis (*Gerasimov, 1946, 64; Gerasimov, 1963, 338, 1230-1233*). Our research indicates that this particular countermark was used at the mints of Apollonia in the middle of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC (*Topalov, 1997, 105-106, 108-109; Topalov, 2002, 125-126, 204*). Due to conflicts between Messambria and Apollonia, this unusual type of Messambria coin was countermarked at the minting house of Apollonia and transformed into an Apollonia coin type. Because Apollonia was in a state of decline at the time, it did not mint new proprietary bronze coins, but instead only countermarked earlier coin types of its own. Thus far, we had not encountered examples of foreign coins bearing Apollonia’s cancer countermark, as is the case with this coin from Messambria. In my recent publications I avoided venturing outside the scope of what was considered standard for the presentation of numismatic research. If I had done the same in this case, my efforts to find new archaeological material would have gone unnoticed, just like all the difficulties in acquiring and researching this material and the help and the lack of help on the part of scholars employed by state-run institutions. The efforts of dozens of Bulgarians, many of whom collectors, made in the process of tracking down archaeological material long-ago removed from its place of discovery, preserving it, ensuring future access to it for the purpose of research, and publicizing it would have gone unnoticed. No one would have asked the question as to whether the current policy on preserving and promulgating cultural heritage is what is supposed to be; No one would want to discuss again what needs to be done to improve this current policy. To produce meaningful scientific research in this particular field, it is not enough to merely get a degree in history or archaeology and get a job at an institution or a museum. This is painfully clear when one considers the significant number of people who graduate in these fields every year and the staggeringly low percentage of those who leave a trace in the field. Currently, regular Bulgarians are deprived of the opportunity to develop enduring interest toward researching and studying artifacts from the historical past of our lands. Citizens with such interests, irrespective of their professional starting point, in time can develop into remarkable researchers who, driven by their conviction and abilities, can make much more significant contributions to the field than those, who simply fit the educational background criteria but lack the inner drive to pursue their interests in history and archaeology. People like this usually either do not start or do not persist working in the field they trained for at university.

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