



Summary :

The ruins of the ancient Doric city of Mesembria are found on the west coast of the Black Sea, in the modern town of Nessebar in Bulgaria. The ancient Greek colonists had chosen the location of the city with particular care, thus building it on the peninsula of Nessebar. The peninsula is protected by natural fortification and enables communication with the mainland through a narrow isthmus 350 m long, while it provides an important harbour for ships directed towards and from the city.

Geographical Location

Nesebar, Bulgaria

Historical Region

Western Black Sea coast

1. Written evidence

Mesembria is the only [colony](#) in the Black Sea which was built by Greeks of Dorian origin. It is located on the peninsula of Nessebar, where there is also the homonymous Bulgarian town.¹ The etymology of the word "Nessebar" comes from the ancient word "Mesembria". Certain valuable information on the foundation of the colony has been preserved by ancient Greek writers. [Herodotus](#), for example, reports that settlers from [Chalcedon](#) and [Byzantium](#) founded Mesembria,² whereas according to Scymnos of Chios³ the town was built by the inhabitants of Chalcedon and the metropolis of Megara. Finally, the ancient geographer [Strabo](#)⁴ relates that Mesembria was founded by settlers from Megara. Another passage from Herodotus⁵ testifies that the town of Mesembria had already been established during the notorious campaign of Darius in Scythia, circa 513 BC.⁶

Archaeological excavations at ancient Mesembria have shown that the Greek settlement was built on the site of a pre-existing [Thracian](#) settlement.⁷ Presumably, this might have also happened with the nearby colony⁸ of [Bizone](#) in the late 5th c. BC.⁹

2. The etymology of the name

The etymology of the word "Mesembria" is provided by ancient authors. Strabo relates that the city was originally called "Menebria", the town of Mena, who was also its founder. Then the same author adds that the word "bria" means "city" in Thracian.¹⁰ Another writer of a later date, Stephanus of Byzantium, has preserved similar information. In particular, he says that Mesembria owns its name to a certain Melsa, apparently from Thrace,¹¹ and so Mesembria is the town of Melsa.¹² This view is confirmed by epigraphic evidence as well.¹³ In this way, the ancient Greek colonists set their settlement under the protection of the hero, king and god Melsa.¹⁴

3. History

3.1. Prehistoric - Archaic Period

According to written testimonies and the archaeological evidence, Mesembria was apparently built in the late 6th c. BC by Greeks of Dorian origin. The ancient city was established in a region where an earlier Thracian settlement had flourished, which is described by Bulgarian historians and archaeologists as a "protopolis", that is an early stage in the emergence of a fully organized settlement of the Classical period, the ancient Greek "polis". This indigenous settlement was fortified with a great wall. The debris within the fortification wall comprised sherds of Thracian pottery and Milesian ceramics of the [Fikellura](#) style, which the archaeological excavations date between the 12th and 6th c. BC. The interaction between the Greek newcomers and the indigenous Thracians (probably of the Nipsaei tribe) resulted in the formation of a Greco-Thracian social and cultural center where "Bria" had hitherto existed.¹⁵



3.2. Classical Period

Since the early 5th c. BC Mesembria gradually has evolved into a centre of the western Black Sea area as well as worldwide. Thus, the Classical period is characterized by close political relations with Athens, whose position and presence across the Black Sea was particularly reinforced after the campaign of Pericles circa 437 BC. This event can account for the participation of Mesembria¹⁶ in the [Delian League](#), at least since 425/424 BC. This specific political situation had a direct impact on the economic life of Mesembria, as it is testified by a silver [coin](#)¹⁷ which was minted between the second half of the 5th c. BC and the first half of the 4th c. BC, in accordance with Athenian standards.¹⁸ The close relations with Athens are also apparent in the discovery of large quantities of Black-figure and Red-figure pottery at the ancient site of Mesembria.¹⁹

3.3. Hellenistic - Early Byzantine Period

Mesembria had close links with the indigenous population of the western Black Sea hinterland, the Thracians. There is a suggestion that Mesembria was apparently paying taxes to the king of Odrys,²⁰ who exerted his influence over the region of northeastern Thrace after the failure of the Persian King Darius in his campaign against the Scythians. The contribution of this particular tax in the 4th and 3rd c. BC²¹ obviously intended to ensure the integrity and independence of Mesembria.²² The inscriptions which have been hitherto discovered state that during the 3rd c. BC the city had issued a consular decree²³ and had signed a declaration (a type of agreement) with Sadala, the Thracian king.²⁴ Due to his benevolence towards the residents of Mesembria, the city awarded him with honours and benefits, among which was the annual prize of a gold wreath with a worth of 500 [staters](#), obviously some form of compulsory taxation.²⁵

Mesembria, apart from the natural fortification of the peninsula, had also a fortified enclosure since the Classical period. Parts of the fortification wall, near the main gate, have been studied. Also, several towers along the wall at strategic points have been identified, such as the hexagonal tower for the protection of the gateway from the north side. The fortifications of the Classical period were also preserved in Hellenistic and Roman times. Nevertheless, in the second half of the 5th c. AD, the fortifications were partly altered due to new strategic factors and construction techniques.²⁶

4. Houses

The archaeological studies conducted so far in the ancient city have revealed that the architecture of Mesembria, at least during the first two centuries since its foundation, did not differ significantly from that of [Olbia Pontica](#) or Masallia (Marseilles). The [houses](#) in Mesembria were built according to the standards of domestic buildings in the entire Mediterranean world. The design and structure of the houses in Mesembria, the building materials and techniques, as well as their interior design, prove that the cities of the Black Sea and of the Mediterranean Sea shared common architecture by the end of the Hellenistic period. This is further illustrated by the discovery of the remains of the so-called "House of Artemidorus" (4th-2nd/1st c. BC.) in Mesembria, as well as by the pottery found in the region.²⁷

5. Cult

The cult life of the people of Mesembria is known mainly from the Hellenistic period onwards. Thus, in the northern harbour of the city there was the temple of [Zeus Hyperdioxios](#) in [Doric order](#), from which only the northwest corner has survived, as well as the base of the bronze statue of the deity. In the southern harbour of the city, at a specifically designated space, there was another temple dedicated to [Apollo](#);²⁸ a large part of the statue of the god has been discovered nearby. The settlers at Mesembria had built their sanctuaries in the same way as in Megara, their metropolis. There were two temples dedicated to Zeus and two dedicated to Apollo; two at the harbours and two in the [agora](#). The agora was at the centre of the peninsula, where the remains of the St. Sophia [basilica](#) were found. This basilica was presumably built on the ruins of the temple of Apollo.



Other deities worshipped in Mesembria were [Athena](#) Soteira, [Dionysos](#),²⁹ the Dioscuri, [Asclepius](#), [Demeter](#) and Kore,³⁰ [Hecate](#), [Isis](#) and [Sarapis](#). We also know that the city had a [gymnasium](#) and a theater, whose remains have not yet come to light. The most important evidence derives from the rich epigraphic³¹ material.

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2. Hdt. 6.33.
3. Skymn. 737-742.
4. Strabo 7.6.1.
5. Hdt. 4.93.
6. Ogenova-Marinova L., "Mesambria et le monde Thrace entre le VIIe et le Ve s. av. n.e.", in Lazarov, M. (ed.), *Thracia Pontica III, Troisieme Symposium International, Les Thraces et les colonies grecques, VII-V s. av. n.e.* (Sofia 1986), p. 241. See also, Lazarov M., "Notizen zur griechischen Kolonisation am westlichen Schwarzen Meer", in Tsetskhladze, G.R. (ed.), *The Greek Colonisation of the Black Sea. Historical Interpretation of Archaeology* (Stuttgart 1998), p. 90.
7. Ogenova-Marinova, L., "Mesambria et le monde Thrace entre le VIIe et le Ve s. av. n.e.", in Lazarov, M. (ed.), *Thracia Pontica III, Troisieme Symposium International, Les Thraces et les colonies grecques, VII-V s. av. n.e.* (Sofia 1986), p. 242. See also, Preshlenov, H., "Messambria", in Grammenos, D.V. – Petropoulos E.K. (ed.), *Ancient Greek Colonies in the Black Sea 1* (Thessaloniki 2003), pp. 164-165.
8. Herman-Hansen, M. – Heine-Nielsen, T. (eds.), *An Inventory of Archaic Classical Poleis: An Investigation Conducted by The Copenhagen Polis Centre for the Danish National Research Foundation* (Oxford 2004), p. 935; Preshlenov, H., "Messambria", in Grammenos, D.V. – Petropoulos, E.K. (ed.), *Ancient Greek Colonies in the Black Sea 1* (Thessaloniki 2003), p. 165.
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10. Strabo 7.6.1.
11. Nawotka, K., *The Western Pontic Cities. History and Political Organization* (Amsterdam 1997), pp. 14-16.
12. Steph. Byz., entry 'Mesembria'. Also cf. Plin., *HN* 4.11.45.
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14. Preshlenov, H., "Messambria", in Grammenos, D.V. – Petropoulos, E.K. (eds.), *Ancient Greek Colonies in the Black Sea 1* (Thessaloniki 2003), pp. 165, 178.
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17. For the full reference on the silver coins of Mesembria see Karayotov, I., "Circulation des monnaies de Bronze de Messambria", in Velkov, V. (ed.), *Nessebre III. In memoriam Jeannae Čimbuleva* (Burgas 2005), p. 194-220.
18. For the numismatic policy of Mesembria see the recent article by Karayotov, I., "Le monnayage de Messambria et les monnayages d'Apollonia, Odessos et Dionysopolis", in Grammenos, D.V. – Petropoulos, E.K. (eds.), *Ancient Greek Colonies in the Black Sea 2* (British Archaeological Reports International Series 1675, Oxford 2007), in. 129 ff. Also cf. Reho-Bumbalova, M., "Céramique attique à figure noires et rouges", in Velkov, V. (ed.), *Nessebre III. In memoriam Jeannae Čimbuleva* (Burgas 2005), pp. 30-50.
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21. Herman-Hansen, M. – Heine-Nielsen, T. (eds.), *An Inventory of Archaic Classical Poleis: An Investigation Conducted by The Copenhagen Polis Centre for the Danish National Research Foundation* (Oxford 2004), p. 935.
22. Preshlenov, H., "Messambria", in Grammenos, D.V. – Petropoulos, E.K. (eds.), *Ancient Greek Colonies in the Black Sea 1* (Thessaloniki 2003), p. 179.
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28. Gotcheva, Z., "La Thrace Pontique et la mythologie grecque", in Grammenos, D.V. – Petropoulos, E.K. (eds.), *Ancient Greek Colonies in the Black Sea 2* (British Archaeological Reports International Series 1675, Oxford 2007), pp. 60-61.
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31. Preshlenov, H., "Messambria", in Grammenos, D.V. – Petropoulos, E.K. (eds.), *Ancient Greek Colonies in the Black Sea 1* (Thessaloniki 2003), pp. 162-163. See also Herman-Hansen, M. – Heine-Nielsen, T. (eds.), *An Inventory of Archaic Classical Poleis: An Investigation Conducted by The Copenhagen Polis Centre for the Danish National Research Foundation* (Oxford 2004), p. 935.



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Glossary :

	agora, the
	The term initially meant the gathering of the people. During historical times this gathering was called ecclesia and the word agora meant the public space where citizens gathered. The agora consists of commercial and religious buildings as well as constructions of political character.
	basilica
	In ancient Roman architecture a large oblong type building used as hall of justice and public meeting place. The roman basilica served as a model for early Christian churches.
	doric order, the



One of the three orders or organizational systems of Ancient Greek originated on the mainland and western Greece. It is characterized by short, faceted, heavy columns with plain, round capitals (tops) and no base. The capital consists of a necking which is of a simple form. The echinus is convex and the abacus is square. Above the capital is a square abacus connecting the capital to the entablature. The Entablature is divided into two horizontal registers, the lower part of which is either smooth or divided by horizontal lines. The upper half is distinctive for the Doric order. The frieze of the Doric entablature is divided into triglyphs and metopes. A triglyph is a unit consisting of three vertical bands which are separated by grooves. Metopes are plain or carved reliefs. The Doric order comes without an individual base. They instead are placed directly on the stylobate. The capital consists of a necking which is of a simple form. The echinus is convex and the abacus is square. Above the capital is a square abacus connecting the capital to the entablature. The Entablature is divided into two horizontal registers, the lower part of which is either smooth or divided by horizontal lines. The upper half is distinctive for the Doric order. The frieze of the Doric entablature is divided into triglyphs and metopes. A triglyph is a unit consisting of three vertical bands which are separated by grooves. Metopes are plain or carved reliefs. The Doric order comes without an individual base. They instead are placed directly on the stylobate.



gymnasium

The gymnasium was one of the most important centres of public life in Greek cities. The institution of the gymnasium, directly connected with the development of the Greek city, aimed to create virtuous citizens and gallant warriors. As educational institutions of public character, the gymnasia were intended for the physical and theoretical education of the young and consisted of separate spaces for special purposes.



stater, the

The term "stater" was used in various areas of the ancient Greek world to define either a standard weight unit or the most important coin in precious metal (gold, silver, electrum) of a numismatic system. The dead weight and accordingly the value of a stater differed from one area to another and it was based on the weight standard effective in the various cities. Therefore, it was necessary each standard to be defined by the authority that issued it (e.g. Aeginetan, Attic, Boeotian, Corinthian).

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