

The Coins with the Legend ΟΔΡΟΣΩΝ: A Reappraisal

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Introduction

Numismatic evidence for Thrace during the Hellenistic period has been growing rapidly in recent years, fueling a steady stream of publications on both long-standing and newly identified problems. Alongside this growth, however, there is a troubling tendency: specialists increasingly build sprawling historical reconstructions on a thin base of primary evidence, trading rigor for attractive hypotheses.

This article focuses on one well-worn topic in Thracian numismatics: a group of small bronze coins bearing the legend ΟΔΡΟΣΩΝ. The subject matters well beyond coin collecting. It touches on historical geography, settlement archaeology, and the political history of Thrace during a poorly understood period — roughly the late 3rd to early 1st century BC.

Despite the growing coin record, the field lacks a proper catalogue of known types and denominations. Poor photo quality in recent publications compounds the problem, leaving most interested readers with limited information to work from. This article aims to bring more discipline to the current debate by assessing the quality of the evidence and the strengths and weaknesses of the arguments put forward so far.

At the heart of the discussion is what the legend ΟΔΡΟΣΩΝ actually means. Some scholars read it as an ethnicon — a collective designation meaning 'of the Odrysians' — pointing to the Odrysian tribal state as the issuing authority. Others read it as a city name in genitive plural, arguing that it refers to a polis called Odrysa or Odrysia known from a single brief reference in Stephanus of Byzantium. The available evidence can support either reading, and the debate has been running for decades.

Types and Denominations

The classification of these coins into types and denominations has been muddled by poor presentation in the literature. Topalov, for instance, distinguishes four types that are really just variants of a single basic type:

Type I (the main type): Obverse: youthful head of Herakles in lion skin, right. Reverse: ΟΔΡΟΣΩΝ above a bull walking left, head facing, with a club below (see Fig. 1, coin 1).

Topalov's 'four types' are really four variants of Type I, distinguished mainly by relief height, weight, and degree of stylistic degradation:

Variant 1 — comparatively low relief; 4.0–4.5 g; c. 19 mm diameter.

Variant 2 — low relief, slightly barbarized style; c. 3.5 g; c. 17 mm.

Variant 3 — high relief with deep die sinking; 4.5–5.0 g; c. 19–20 mm.

Variant 4 — heavily barbarized, attributed to later local imitations; 3.0–5.0 g; c. 16–19 mm.

Type II: Same obverse, but the bull walks right and the legend runs retrograde — the mirror image of Type I (see Fig. 1, coin 2). A few specimens are known.

A third type, noted by Manov, is a tiny bronze with a head of Artemis or Apollo on the obverse and a crested helmet flanked by the letters O-Δ on the reverse (weight: 1.52 g). He sees it as a possible link between the royal coinage of the Odrysian king Kotys and the ΟΔΡΟΣΩΝ series.

Across all types, weights range from 2.97 to 5.26 g with diameters of 14–20 mm, suggesting at most two denominations with a general drift toward lighter weights over time. In all cases these are small-change coins, not prestige issues.



Fig. 1. Coins referenced in this article. Nos. 1–2: ΟΔΡΟΣΩΝ bronze types I and II (after Koychev 2003 and Topalov 2009). Nos. 3–4: Posthumous Alexander-type tetradrachms with monograms ΦΠ and ΟΠ on the reverse, discussed in connection with the disputed Philippopolis hypothesis (after Koychev 2003).

Iconography and Style

The iconography is closely tied to the question of when these coins were made and what they were for. No systematic die study exists yet, but both Koychev and Topalov arrange the coins chronologically by artistic quality — from the finest early specimens (possibly the work of Greek engravers) to progressively degraded, barbarized images with illegible legends. This pattern parallels what happened to the imitative issues of Thasos and

Maroneia in the early 1st century BC, where prolonged local circulation produced increasingly garbled copies.

The Herakles head on the obverse is unambiguously Macedonian royal iconography, used in Thrace from the early Hellenistic period. The debate is about where the specific stylistic tradition came from. Some scholars point to the posthumous Alexander-type tetradrachms of Kabyle, implying either direct chronological overlap or institutional continuity between Kabyle and the ΟΔΡΟΣΩΝ issuer. Topalov goes so far as to connect both mints as Thracian royal residences sharing a common symbolic vocabulary.

Manov is more cautious. He sees Kabyle parallels but notes that the Philip V tetradrachms offer equally good comparanda. His main focus is on the timing: he wants to link the ΟΔΡΟΣΩΝ coins to the period just after the Odrysians expelled the Macedonian garrison from Philippopolis in 183 BC, reading them as a statement of political independence.

The author of this article finds both arguments unpersuasive as historical interpretation, though the numismatic parallels with Kabyle's bronze Type D (Herakles / Artemis with torches, club, and KABY legend) are more convincing than the tetradrachm comparisons. Type D is the most heavily produced and longest-running bronze issue from Kabyle and, crucially, it also shows the same stylistic degradation over time — suggesting the two series may overlap chronologically rather than one following the other.

As for the bull and club on the reverse: Manov interprets this as a political symbol, the Odrysian bull (incarnation of Dionysos-Zagreus) triumphant over the Macedonian club of Herakles. The author is skeptical. The bull appears nowhere else in pre-Roman Thracian coinage as a divine symbol, but it does appear on autonomous Macedonian bronze from Pella under Philip V and Perseus, in exactly the same posture as on the ΟΔΡΟΣΩΝ Type II coins. The bull-and-club combination fits naturally within the Heraklean mythological cycle — the cattle of Geryon — and simply reinforces the obverse image rather than contradicting it. Using it as evidence for anti-Macedonian sentiment is overreach.

Chronology and Functions

Pinning down the date of these coins is the hardest problem, because the written sources offer no clean anchor points. The most commonly cited text is Polybius 23.8 (= Livy 39.53.6–14), which records Philip V's campaign against Philippopolis and the Odrysians in 184/183 BC. Many scholars use this as a starting point, arguing that the Odrysians began striking their own coins once they expelled Philip's garrison in 183.

The author considers this chronology unlikely for a fundamental reason: if the coins were meant to advertise Odrysian independence from Macedon, it makes no sense to advertise it using Macedonian royal iconography. The Herakles head and the club are the Antigonid dynasty's calling cards. A coin expressing defiance of Macedon would not look Macedonian.

The iconography makes far better sense as a symbol of alliance. And the best-documented Odrysian-Macedonian alliance is the one that brought King Kotys and his son Bitys into the Third Macedonian War (171–168 BC) on the side of Perseus. Bitys was held at Pella as a hostage — not as a prisoner of war, but as a pledge of Odrysian military cooperation demanded by Perseus before the fighting started.

This political context aligns perfectly with what was happening inside Macedonia at the same time. After the Peace of Apamea in 188 BC, Philip V reorganized his coinage and began granting regional and civic communities the right to strike their own small bronze and silver denominations. Three regional centers are attested: Amphipolis (legend MAKEΔONΩN), Thessalonika (MAKEΔONΩN AMΦAΞIΩN), and Pella (MAKEΔONΩN BOTTEATΩN). Paeonia and Paroria may also have participated. Under Perseus, this regional autonomous coinage reached its peak.

A close parallel to the ΟΔΡΟΣΩΝ coins is the ΠΑΙΟΝΩΝ bronze series — three types with a thunderbolt reverse — which some scholars attribute to the Paeonian administrative district under Philip V and Perseus. Like the Odrysian coins, these carry a collective ethnic legend rather than a royal name. The pattern is the same: peripheral allies or dependencies striking small bronze that signals their membership in the Macedonian political orbit.

The author therefore proposes that the first ΟΔΡΟΣΩΝ emissions were struck in the late 170s or early 160s BC, during the reign of Perseus, as a public statement that the Odrysians were allied with the Macedonian kingdom. This dating is supported by the overstruck specimens: of the three known examples, two are struck over genuine Perseus coins, which gives a firm terminus post quem.

After Pydna (168 BC) and the Roman victory, Kotys's ambassadors rushed to Rome to negotiate the return of Bitys, diplomatically claiming that Kotys had joined Perseus under duress. The Romans accepted this, returned Bitys, and each Thracian delegate received 2,000 asses as a gift — escorted home by none other than Flamininus, the victor of Cynoscephalae. From 167 BC onward, the Odrysians became Rome's preferred Thracian allies, a status that may well have allowed — or even encouraged — continued coin production. The coins' stylistic barbarization over time is consistent with a long circulation life in local interior Thracian markets, serving small-scale exchange rather than any representative political function.

One intriguing detail: Livy reports that each Thracian delegate received 2,000 asses — a weight of 54 to 81 kilograms per person in coined bronze. Whether this was raw metal or struck coin, it was a substantial gift requiring separate transport and an escort. Could it have been seed money for local coinage production? The question cannot be answered from the existing hoard evidence, but it is worth keeping in mind.

Where Were These Coins Struck?

The limited type variety and the geographic distribution of finds suggest a single mint. The first scholar to systematically address this was T. Gerasimov (1975), who proposed that the coins belonged to a city called Odrysa or Odrysia attested only in Stephanus of Byzantium — a single notice, unconfirmed by any other ancient source. He placed it in southeastern Thrace and tentatively identified it with the predecessor settlement of Hadrianopolis (modern Edirne).

More recent coin finds have shifted the picture. The main concentration is no longer in the lower Tundzha/Maritsa basin but in the Upper Thracian Plain around modern Plovdiv. This has led several scholars to identify the issuing center with Philippopolis — ancient Plovdiv — including Kisyov, who found impressions of $\text{O}\Delta\text{P}\text{O}\Sigma\text{Q}\text{N}$ coins pressed into the wet clay of an altar at Nebet-tepe during its construction, and who dated the altar to the early 2nd century BC.

Topalov goes further, constructing an elaborate argument that Philippopolis was renamed Odroza after 183 BC and that two posthumous Alexander-type tetradrachms (Figs. 3–4) with monograms $\Phi\Pi$ and $\text{O}\Pi$ on the reverse document successive city names: Philippopolis and then Odrozopolis. Martin Price, the leading authority on posthumous Alexandrine coinage, told Topalov in private correspondence that the $\Phi\Pi$ specimens were more likely attributable to a west Pontic city or southeastern Thrace — and did not include them in his 1991 catalogue. The author agrees with Price: reading ethnic identities from coin monograms is inherently speculative, and inventing the toponym 'Odrozopolis' from a monogram is pure fiction.

A separate error worth correcting: some Bulgarian scholars have perpetuated a misattribution originating in Head's 1887 *Historia Nummorum*, which listed a silver tetradrachm with the letters $\text{O}\Delta\text{P}\Sigma\text{I}$ on the reverse under Odryasian coinage. Head himself corrected this mistake in 1892, acknowledging the coin had nothing to do with Thrace and that the letters were misread. Yet the attribution keeps reappearing in recent literature.

Conclusions

The ΟΔΡΟΣΩΝ bronze coins cannot be used as evidence for the existence of a city of that name in Thrace. The sole ancient source for such a city (Stephanus of Byzantium) may ultimately derive from Strabo, and the notice may reflect a simple confusion of ethnonym with toponym.

The numismatic case for connecting these coins with Macedonian coinage after the 187–185 BC reforms is sound. But the historical reading should follow from that, not contradict it. These coins are best understood not as an anti-Macedonian statement but as the bronze coinage of the Odrysian political community acting as a Macedonian ally — parallel to the Paeonian ΠΑΙΟΝΩΝ series and the regional issues of the Macedonian districts under Philip V and Perseus.

After 167 BC, when the Odrysians transferred their allegiance to Rome, the same coins continued circulating. Their long life in interior Thracian markets — evidenced by the progressive barbarization of the images — reflects their practical utility as small change rather than any ongoing political message. The fact that Rome consistently favored the Odrysians as its primary Thracian partners for decades after Pydna provided a stable environment in which this coinage could remain in use long after the Antigonid kingdom had ceased to exist.

Notes

1 Stephanus of Byzantium, *Ethnica* (ed. Billerbeck, Lentini, Neumann-Hartmann, Walter de Gruyter, Vol. III, 2014): 'Οδρύσοι: an ethnic group of Thrace... there is also a city of theirs called Odrysa, also known as Odrysia.' The notice is unique and unconfirmed by other ancient sources.

2 Rare exceptions in the spelling of the legend are attributed to die damage or engravers' errors. Koychev's claim that some coins substitute Σ with Ζ 'under the influence of Roman presence' is rejected here as unsupported.

3 Draganov was the first to use the 184/183 date for the end of Kabyle's autonomous coinage, but his own sources do not support it. More recent excavations at the western fortification wall suggest the city continued functioning well into the second half of the 2nd century BC.

4 Draganov's own statistics place Kabyle's bronze Type D first by number of die pairs (54–56 obverse, 90–91 reverse) and attested specimens (246–261), making it by far the most massively produced issue from that mint.

5 The bull reverse also appears on autonomous Macedonian bronze from Pella under Philip V and Perseus (Draganov 2001, no. 799 = Gaebler 1935, Taf. XII.16), in the same posture as on ΟΔΡΟΣΩΝ Type II — a direct iconographic parallel that undermines readings of the bull as uniquely Thracian.

6 On the Macedonian monetary reforms after Apamea see: Gaebler 1906, 1–2; Touratsoglou 2012, 37, 47; Mørkholm 1991, 163ff.

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