

# West Slope Pottery from Mesambria Pontike

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Mesambria Pontike was established towards the end of the 6th century BC on a picturesque peninsula on the west coast of the Black Sea as a Dorian *apoi-  
kia* (Fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> The modern city that inherited the territory of the ancient Greek colony and of the Byzantine city of Mesemvria bears the name Nesebar. It integrates an imposing number of protected sites and buildings including fortification walls, Medieval churches and old wooden houses, all of which have earned Nesebar a deserved place on the UNESCO world heritage list as a city-museum. The urban infrastructure and numerous protected monuments on the other hand prevent the realization of comprehensive archaeological excavations, and these have been restricted to small sea-side plots or the rare new building sites inside the city.

In the Hellenistic age, Mesambria was evidently a thriving community of some political and commercial importance; the archaeologically investigated remains from this period include fortification walls, private houses with deep cellars and numerous graves. The Hellenistic pottery from Mesambria, how-

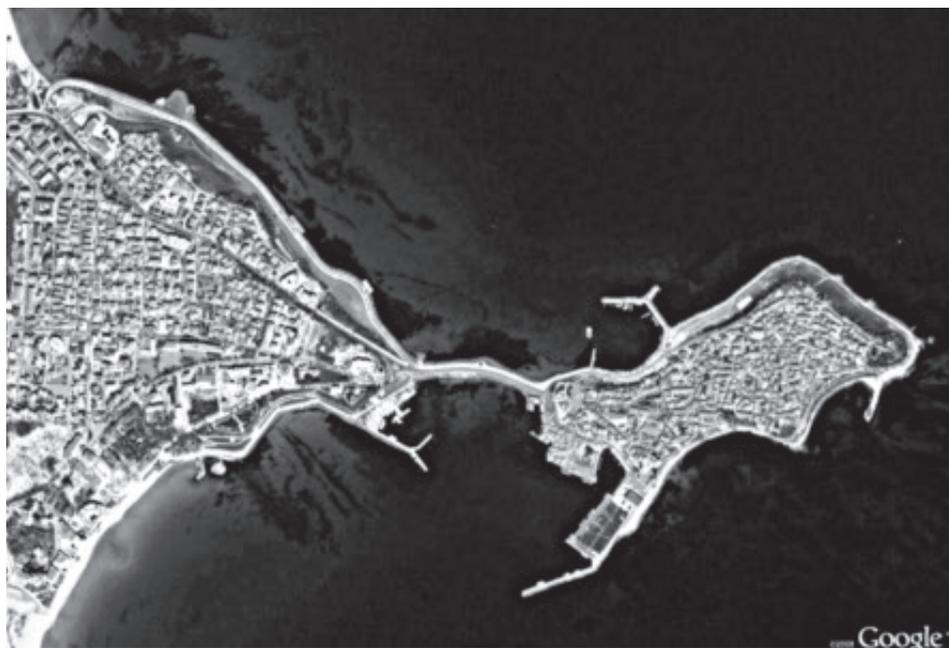


Fig. 1. A satellite view of Nesebar (image by Google Maps).

ever, has not been the object of any specialized investigation or discussion so far.

Between the two world wars, the archaeological excavations of Mesambria had a rather sporadic character, reaching a greater intensity in a succession of regular yearly campaigns in the 1960s and 70s.<sup>2</sup> However, in the course of these investigations, the stratigraphic accumulations were not strictly documented and no closed complexes were identified. Thus, most of the artefacts from these campaigns had no certain contextual origin and were entered in the museum registers only with the location of the site and without any stratigraphic data whatsoever.<sup>3</sup> Recent excavations have permitted more detailed stratigraphical observations. As a result, two closed Hellenistic complexes were studied in 2006 and 2007, but these contained no West Slope pottery, the topic of the present study. A few West Slope fragments were found on the same site in a dump of pottery waste mixed with other material of the same age.<sup>4</sup> The finds from the ancient necropolis offer better contextual possibilities for the study of West Slope pottery, but these have so far yielded only a dozen intact vases.<sup>5</sup>

The ceramic vases with West Slope decoration found over the years at Mesambria comprise nowadays the greatest and most representative collection in Bulgaria.<sup>6</sup> Some of these (mainly different types of kantharoi with simple and conventional decoration) belong to the early Hellenistic age and therefore will not be discussed in detail in the present paper in order to keep it as much as possible within the chronological limits of the conference.

Due to the rarity of closed complexes, the analyzed material will be presented in groups according to the shapes of the vases. Those rare examples that do belong to closed complexes will be specially noted.

## Pottery of East Aegean origin or of East Aegean type

### *S-shaped kantharoi*

S-shaped kantharoi comprise the most numerous group, well-attested not only in Mesambria, but also in other West Pontic colonies.<sup>7</sup> The examples from Mesambria belong to different variants of this large group and offer interesting possibilities for the analysis of the shape's development. Some kantharoi from Mesambria stand very close to Anatolian examples, with shapes and glazing resembling finds from Pergamon, Ephesos, Rhodos and Sardis. One of these is the kantharos in the Museum of Burgas (Fig. 2), a chance find with no context from the village of Ravda (now incorporated in the city of Nesebar). Another one, found on the peninsula in a pit with chronologically mixed contents, is quite similar in both shape and glazing to the first mentioned but displays a peculiar flat discoid foot quite different from the usual profiled annular feet seen on the Pergamene examples (Fig. 3; Ognenova 1960, fig. 8). Two undecorated kantharoi from the necropolis of Mesambria (Figs. 4-6) exhibit a simplified outline. One (Fig. 6) may represent a peculiar hybrid between two basic



Fig. 2. S-shaped kantharos from Ravda near Nesebar, Burgas Museum, No 1835.



Fig. 3. S-shaped kantharos from excavations in the city.



Fig. 4. S-shaped kantharos from the necropolis, excavations 2008 (Nesebar Museum, grave 524).

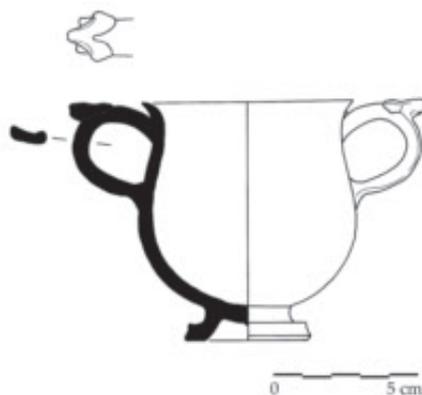


Fig. 5. Same as Fig. 4.

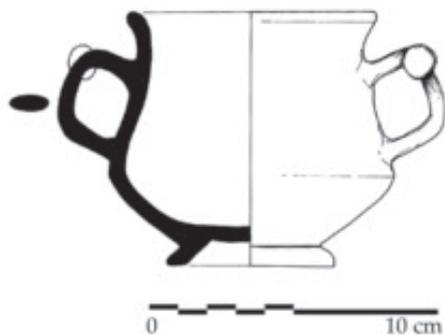


Fig. 6. Hybrid S-shaped kantharos from old excavations, now in the Burgas museum (No 1308).

shapes of the Anatolian repertoire: the S-shaped kantharos and the skyphos classified by D. Behr as type C or by G. Hübner as type I, shape 1.<sup>8</sup> The shaping of the foot of the kantharos from Mesambria is another feature suggesting its production in a workshop quite distant from the standards and quality control of the large Anatolian producers.

The S-shaped kantharoi are usually dated to the later centuries of the Hellenistic age.<sup>9</sup> Evidence from



Fig. 7. Finds in situ, grave No 524, 2008.

Sardis, however, suggests a rather earlier starting date, roughly between the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and the second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC.<sup>10</sup> complexes from Bulgaria (Mesambria and Odessos) support an early starting date. The kantharos illustrated in Figs. 4-5 was found in a grave in the necropolis of Mesambria together with a bronze coin of the city dated to the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> or the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC,<sup>11</sup> and with a lagynos (Fig. 7) which must have been produced about or after the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC according to the parallels from Athens and Attica.<sup>12</sup> The other imitative example illustrated here in Fig. 6 comes from a grave together with a skyphos also of local manufacture datable to the second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> or the early 1<sup>st</sup> century BC.<sup>13</sup> The two offer a good example of the length of the period in which these vases remained in use.

### *Skyphoi*

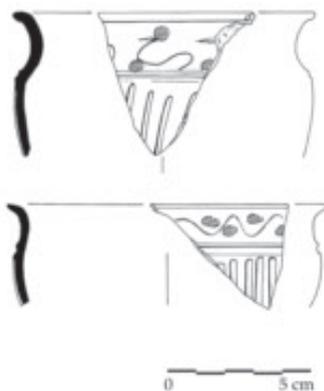
The deep, open skyphoi, typical of the end of the early Hellenistic age and well-known in Rhodos, Pergamon, Ephesos and elsewhere,<sup>14</sup> are represented by numerous fragments not only in Mesambria but also in the other Greek colonies along the Bulgarian Black Sea coast.<sup>15</sup> Several fragments from a different type of skyphos, of definitely later chronology, have been found in the Hellenistic depot mentioned above.

### Skyphoi with a concave decorative panel under the rim and ribbed lower body

There were several fragments belonging to at least two separate vases of this group in the depot (Figs. 8-9). They have a specific concave upper wall bearing the decoration, which is simple and almost identical on the two illustrated



Fig. 8. A skyphos fragment from the excavations in the city in 2007, Nesebar Museum.



▷  
Fig. 9. Skyphos fragments from the excavations in the city in 2007, Nesebar Museum.

fragments. I have not come across any absolute parallels, but the general morphological traits are similar to those of Behr's type A, dated about and after the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC,<sup>16</sup> and to single examples from Pergamon<sup>17</sup> and from Daskyleion.<sup>18</sup> However, as the fragments from Mesambria are similar, but not identical, to the type A skyphos from Anatolia, the inferred chronological indication should be taken as conjectural.

#### Straight-walled skyphoi

Three fragments belong to one open shape vase, a skyphos with a very thin, straight upper wall, a vertical handle with a spool-shaped rotelle for a thumb-rest and a careless ivy leaf decoration (Figs. 10-11). The full reconstruction of the shape is rather uncertain and, therefore, a more precise date is difficult to suggest.



Fig. 10. Fragments from a skyphos from the excavations in the city in 2007, Nesebar Museum.



Fig. 11. Same as Fig. 10.



Fig. 12. A skyphos fragment from the excavations in the city in 2007, Nesebar Museum.



Fig. 13. Skyphos fragments from the excavations in the city in 2007, Nesebar Museum.



### Skyphoi with incised line decoration

Two fragments belonging to different vases (Figs. 12-13) have both the shape and decoration of Behr's type C skyphoi.<sup>19</sup> The first one (Fig. 12) clearly belongs to this group.<sup>20</sup> The other (Fig. 13) has identical decoration but displays a more vertical upper wall with a plain rim, thus introducing a variant of the general type. Rims shaped like this appear on kantharoi with cylindrical shape, an angular transition to the lower part of the body, and an appliqué decoration, which might be chronologically indicative.<sup>21</sup> It is usual to date the Behr type C skyphoi rather late in the Hellenistic age, but the appearance of the appliqué variant (Hübner type I, shape 1) is placed around 170-160 BC.<sup>22</sup>

### Cups with interior decoration

The cup with interior decoration seems to have been one of the preferred pottery shapes among the inhabitants of Hellenistic Mesambria. Over the years, many intact examples and a significant quantity of fragments have appeared.

### Cups with palmettes and/or dolphins

One group of these cups carries a decoration consisting of a central rosette on the bottom (sometimes also interpreted as a star) and bands of palmettes (or alternating palmettes and dolphins) on the inner side of the wall.<sup>23</sup> Three Mesambrian examples come from graves, but unfortunately the contexts are not precisely datable and only a rather long period of time can be inferred for their dating. One of these (Figs. 14-16), with a central rosette surrounded by palmettes and almond-shaped ornaments, was found with unguentaria and a coin from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC. Although inadequately preserved, it displays the greatest precision in the elaboration of the decoration in the whole group,

Fig. 14. Cup with interior decoration from the necropolis, excavations 2008, grave 486, Nesebar Museum.



Fig. 15. Same as Fig. 14.



Fig. 16. Same as Fig. 14.



Fig. 17. Cup with interior decoration from the city, Nesebar Museum, No 966.



Fig. 18. Same as Fig. 17.

an indication for an early fabrication date (probably in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC) according to current opinions.<sup>24</sup> Three other cups with palmettes and dolphins from Mesambria display a more schematic (although not completely careless) treatment of the palmettes, and they should accordingly be given a somewhat more advanced dating. One (Figs. 17-18) has good parallels in Pergamon<sup>25</sup> and Sardis.<sup>26</sup> Although their chronology to a certain degree remains controversial, they likely belong to the period between about 225 and the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC.<sup>27</sup>

#### Cup with a relief star and decorated walls

A second decorative scheme is represented from Mesambria by a fine black-glazed cup with a relief medallion in the centre consisting of a complex double rosette of lotus and acanthus leaves with additional miniature elements all around. The medallion is surrounded on the inside walls of the cup with a composite band of rather carelessly executed West Slope decoration (Figs. 19-20). This is an extremely rare item; the only known ceramic parallels are two fragments with medallions found in the Athenian Agora.<sup>28</sup> The decorative scheme imitates a group of metal vases, the best known examples being three silver cups from the Metropolitan Museum which were presumably buried towards the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC.<sup>29</sup> They display a decorative scheme repeated almost exactly in our ceramic version from Mesambria.

The cup was found in a stone cist grave together with other finds, which are for the most part not chronologically indicative. An unguentarium with painted decoration (Fig. 28) could, based on its parallels, be placed towards the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC. This date is consistent with the alleged date of the Metropolitan cups and seems therefore suggestive of the probable date of the cup from Mesambria.

Fig. 19. Cup with plastic medallion,  
Nesebar Museum.

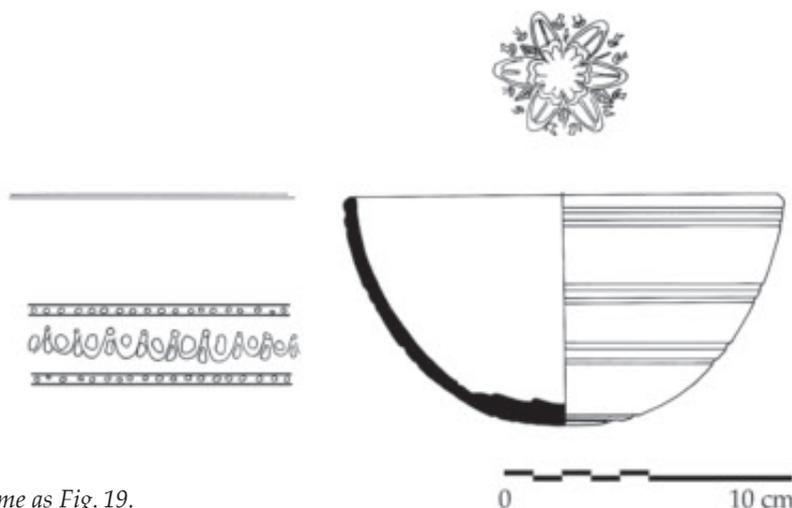


Fig. 20. Same as Fig. 19.

### *Amphorae and oinochoai*

Among the finds from Mesambria are a number of fragments from Anatolian amphorae (Figs. 21-22), which were very popular in the Pontic region.<sup>30</sup> The fragments from Mesambria display the conventional decorative patterns of this group and do not impress with any originality. A singular vase deserves special notice, a closed shape with one handle which could be classified as an oinochoe, but which by its shape and decorative scheme imitates the amphorae (Fig. 23). A similar affinity between amphorae and oinochoai has been observed in a group of vases from the Athenian Agora and could have been a common propensity of the Hellenistic potters. Unlike the amphorae, the oinochoe has



Fig. 21. Fragments of West Slope amphorae from the excavations in the city in 2007.

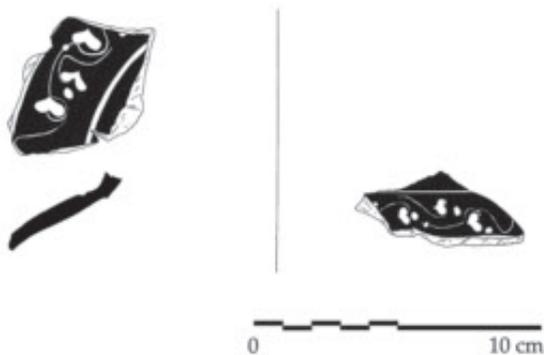


Fig. 22. Fragments of West Slope amphorae from the excavations in the city in 2007.



Fig. 23. Amphora-shaped oinochoe from the city, Nesebar Museum, No 513.

a plain mouth, a narrower neck and a simpler foot; however, both the placement of the decoration and the ornamental patterns repeat those usual for the amphorae. According to the data in the museum register, the oinochoe from Mesambria was found in the basement of a house in the city in a mixed context containing some earlier finds. Its affinities imply a possible date after the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC when the shape of the Anatolian amphora to which it is typologically tied was already well established.<sup>31</sup>

### Kraters

Fragments of kraters are not numerous, but among them are single examples displaying West Slope decoration on the mouth or on the outside of the neck. The fragments belonging to the first of these two categories can be attributed to the standard Anatolian kraters<sup>32</sup> and display a faint decoration of ivy twig or dolphin patterns (Fig. 24). Another type of krater with a laurel wreath decoration on the outside of the neck (Figs. 25-26), belonging to a rarer type, finds good typological parallels among the finds from Rhodos.<sup>33</sup>



Fig. 24. Fragments from a West Slope crater from the excavations in the city in 2007.

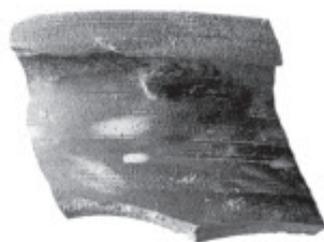


Fig. 25. Fragment from a West Slope crater from the excavations in the city in 2007.



Fig. 26. Same as Fig. 25.



Fig. 27. West Slope unguentarium, Nesebar Museum.



Fig. 28. West Slope unguentarium from the necropolis, excavations in 1962, Nesebar Museum, No 348.

### *Unguentaria*

Most Hellenistic graves in the necropolis of Mesambria contained simple unguentaria, probably of local origin. There are only two examples in the Museum in Nesebar that have West Slope decoration. The first has a simple necklace pattern (Fig. 27), while the second displays a frieze of crudely painted birds (Fig. 28). A similar motif is seen on an unguentarium from Rhodes dated to the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC.<sup>34</sup> Birds as an element of West Slope decoration are not exceptional for the Black Sea region; there are examples on other vase shapes, but always in the context of the Anatolian repertoire (e.g., a krater rim fragment from Pantikapaion).<sup>35</sup> The unguentarium from Mesambria was found in the same grave as the cup with relief medallion discussed above (Figs. 19-20).

### **Pontic pottery**

The ceramic types created locally in the workshops of the Pontic region take a simplified approach to the decorative process and can only partially be referred to as the West Slope class of pottery.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, quite a few examples offer exceptions to this general principle and associate the output of local potters with the general trends of the Mediterranean ceramic production. It should be emphasized that we discuss here mainly the original types created in the local Pontic milieu and not the imitations repeating, more or less directly, Mediterranean prototypes.



Fig. 29. West slope kantharos, Nesebar Museum, No 2061 (from the city)



Fig. 30. West Slope kantharos, Nesebar Museum, No 1637.

### *Kantharoi with particularly elongated proportions*

A very tall and slender kantharos is emblematic for the Pontic repertoire in the Hellenistic age (Figs. 29-30). Examples are known from most of the Greek colonies along the northwestern coastline of the Black Sea, and they constitute a distinct group despite variations in size and proportions. The Museum in Nesebar possesses several kantharoi of this type, with large overall dimensions and particularly elongated proportions. They all display a very high neck over a ribbed bowl, which is extremely small in comparison. The glazing is reddish-brown in colour. In two instances, the upper wall bears West Slope decoration: a rather careless necklace pattern similar to the one known from the Anatolian kantharoi in one case, and a rather more elaborate ivy garland in the other. The dating of the elongated kantharoi remains open to discussion; one was in a 2<sup>nd</sup>-century BC context at Olbia,<sup>37</sup> and this offers a generally accepted loose date. However, a burial context in Mesambria implies that their production might have started already in the late 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC.

### *Squat cylindrical skyphoi*

Skyphoi with low, vertical upper walls separated by an angular ridge from the shallow conical lower cup (Fig. 31) were quite popular in Mesambria, as for that matter everywhere else along the northwestern Black Sea coast.<sup>38</sup> They are usually dated to the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> to the early 1<sup>st</sup> century BC.<sup>39</sup> Only a few of the known examples have West Slope decoration, usually a string of

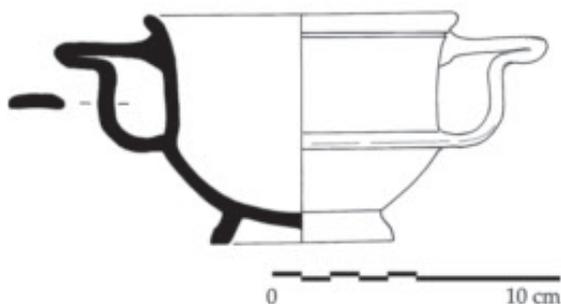


Fig. 31. Squat cylindrical skyphos from the excavations of the necropolis in 2008, Nesebar Museum.

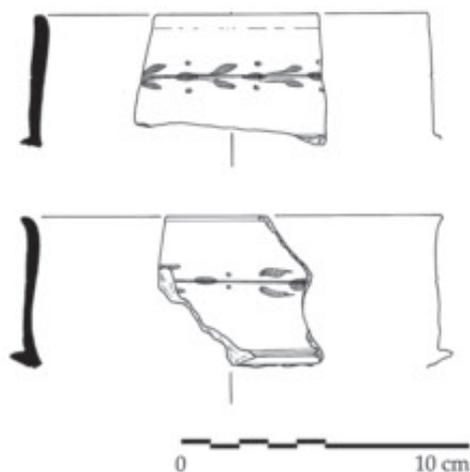


Fig. 32. Fragments from squat cylindrical skyphoi from excavations in the city in 2007, Nesebar Museum.

necklace pendants or an olive twig (Fig. 32). Besides the fragments from Memsambria there is a complete vase of this type from an unpublished find, now on display in the Museum in Varna, with the same rather casual decoration.

## Conclusion

1. The pottery from Nesebar supports previous observations on the characteristics of Late Hellenistic pottery complexes in the Northwestern Black Sea area.<sup>40</sup> Most of the material finds close parallels in the West Slope pottery from the East Greek centres of Western Anatolia and may be of East Aegean origin. Without specialized clay analyses, the differentiation between imported and locally produced vases remains ambiguous, for we are not yet fully aware of the possibilities of the local workshops to reproduce the shapes inspired from imported models.

Some examples, however, do deviate from the East Aegean standards far enough to permit an attribution as local, Pontic imitations of the shapes and decorations characteristic of the production of the workshops in Pergamon, Rhodes, Ephesos and the other East Aegean pottery production centres.

2. The second group recognized among the finds from Nesebar features pottery created and reproduced in a local Pontic milieu. Very few vases from this group bear any decoration at all implying that West Slope as a decorative style played an insignificant role in the repertoire of the local potters. Where present, the decoration is rather casual and the patterns are usually simple and unvaried. The workshops in which this local style pottery was produced remain difficult to establish, but it could be suggested that some might have had their origin in Mesambria. This conjecture is most probable in the case of the angular Pontic skyphoi, both because of their high frequency among the finds from Nesebar and for their appearance in the Thracian hinterland, notably at Kabyle.

## Notes

- 1 Velkov 1985.
- 2 Ivanov 1956; Velkov & Karayotov eds. 2005.
- 3 Ognenova 1960.
- 4 Preliminary report in Božkova et al. 2008, 304-307.
- 5 Čimbuleva 1969; 2005.
- 6 The West Slope vases and pottery fragments from Mesambria are split between the local museum in Nesebar and the regional museum in Burgas. The study of entire vases and fragments in the stores and exposition of the Museum in Nesebar was made possible by the kind permission and collaboration of the director Mrs. P. Kijaškina and of Mr. T. Marvakov, keeper of antiquities, to whom I once more express my sincere gratitude.
- 7 See Behr 1988, 113-123; Rotroff 2002, 100; Rotroff & Oliver 2003, 38-39 for the East Aegean finds and Tončeva 1961, 30, fig. 6; Ivanov 1956, 95, no 5, pl. V for those from other sites along the Bulgarian Black Sea littoral.
- 8 Behr 1988, 113-123, 126; Hübner 1993, fig. 5, no. 106.
- 9 Behr 1988, 113-123.
- 10 Rotroff & Oliver 2003, 38-39.
- 11 The coins from the necropolis of Mesambria have been determined and dated by prof. Ivan Karayotov.
- 12 Rotroff 2006a, nos. 101-103.
- 13 Božkova 1997, 12, type III.2.
- 14 Patsiada 1990, 113-114, fig. 12; Rotroff & Oliver 2003, 39.
- 15 E.g. Galabov 1965, no. 98, fig. 35 from Apollonia.
- 16 Behr 1988, 126.
- 17 Behr 1988, no. 22.
- 18 Dereboyly 2003, 61, BY 35.
- 19 Behr 1988, 126-127.
- 20 The same shape but in a variant with appliqué decoration is classified by G. Hübner as type I, shape 1, see Hübner 1993, 22-24.
- 21 Hübner 1993, fig. 5, no 106, type I, shape 2. Hübner (1993, 49) dates this shape to around 160-130 BC.
- 22 Hübner 1993, 49.

- 23 For Anatolian examples, see Behr 1988, 145-146; Patsiada 1990, 109-110, figs. 52-53; Rotroff & Oliver 2003, 41-42.
- 24 Cf. Rotroff & Oliver 2003, 42.
- 25 Behr 1988, no. 49.
- 26 Rotroff & Oliver 2003, no. 140.
- 27 Rotroff & Oliver 2003, 42.
- 28 Rotroff 2004.
- 29 Guzzo 2003.
- 30 Rotroff & Oliver 2003, 42-43 for the Anatolian origin of these amphorae, and Knipovič 1949, 1/1, 2; Rotroff 2002, 104; Lungu 2000-2001, 261-272 for their dissemination in the Pontic area.
- 31 Rotroff 2002, 99-100.
- 32 See Behr 1988, 156-159; Rotroff 2002, 100; and Rotroff & Oliver 2003, 43-44 with a useful discussion on chronology.
- 33 Patsiada 1990, 120-121, nos. 125-130, and from other sites (cf. Ahrens et al. 2008, 97, fig. 25).
- 34 Patsiada 1990, fig. 77, no 191.
- 35 Blavatskij 1962, fig. 40/5.
- 36 Božkova 1997, 11, type I.2.
- 37 Levi 1964b, 246, fig. 72.
- 38 Božkova 1997.
- 39 Bucovala 1967, 84, fig. 51 b from Tomis; Farmakovskij 1903b, 54, fig. 56 and Parovič-Pešikan 1974, 86, fig. 80/8 from Olbia; Milčeva 1971, 39, fig. 4, no. 3 from Kabyle in the interior of Thrace.
- 40 Knipovič 1949; Lungu 2000-2001; Rotroff 2002.