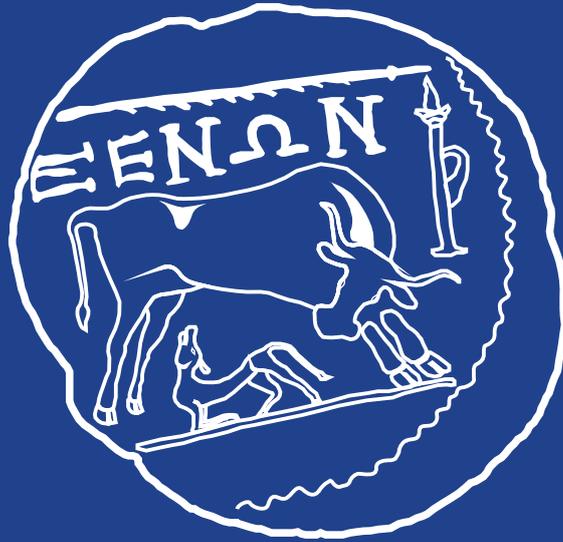


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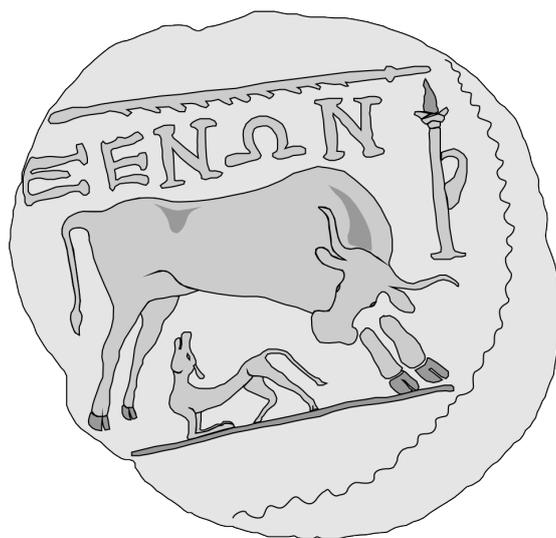
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*This volume is dedicated to Florin Drașovean at 70 years*

*Acest volum este dedicat lui Florin Drașovean cu ocazia împlinirii a 70 de ani*





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# Theos Megas Derzelas, an Enigmatic Deity of Odessos: Cult and Iconographic Representations. A Numismatic and Epigraphic Study

**Feraru Remus Mihai**

**Abstract:** The study here addresses the cult and iconography of Theos Megas Derzelas from Odessos based on Hellenistic and Roman date numismatic documents as well as Roman date inscriptions. Theos Megas is a Thracian origin god, filtered by the Greeks and transferred to the Roman world. Theos Megas might be a local chthonian deity, adopted by the Greek colonists as early as their arrival on the Black Sea shores. During the Hellenistic period, Theos Megas received the title of “Great God” and took up iconographical features of Greek chthonian deities. The god’s iconographic representations (standing, reclined or riding, holding the patera and cornucopia), established since the second half of the 2nd century BC, endured until the Roman period, when Theos Megas was assimilated with Derzelas, another Thracian deity from north-eastern Bulgaria. Theos Megas’s cult development, whose existence may be assumed as of the Hellenistic period, is better outlined particularly during the rule of emperor Gordian III (238-244).

**Key words:** Theos Megas; Derzelas; Odessos; cult; iconographic representations.

*Theos Megas* (Θεὸς Μέγας) or *Theos Megas Derzelas* (Θεὸς Μέγας Δερζελας)<sup>1</sup>, also called the “Great God” stands out as an important local deity in the pantheon of Odessos (today Varna, in Bulgaria), a Milesian colony located on the western shore of the Black Sea<sup>2</sup>. *Theos Megas* was the subject of earliest investigations carried out more than one century ago, when Behrendt Pick discussed for the first time coins discovered at Odessos, whose reverse contained the deity’s image and name<sup>3</sup>.

Our research has resulted in a synthesis study whose aim is to discuss the cult and iconographic representations of Theos Megas at Odessos, based mainly on numismatic documents, yet also a few inscriptions dated to the Roman period. The oldest coin issues of Odessos depicting Theos Megas date to the 3rd – 1st century BC. The image of the same deity emerges on almost all coins struck by Odessos during the Roman period. The analysis of the iconographic depictions of Theos Megas supplies precious information related to the god’s origin, nature and attributes, as well as its possible assimilation with other deities in the pantheon of Odessos. For the Roman period, epigraphic documents add to those numismatic, completing information regarding the cult of Theos Megas and the forms it took.

## 1. Hypotheses concerning the origin and nature of Theos Megas

The origin and nature of Theos Megas were the object of much controversy among the scholars. B. Pick identifies *Theos Megas* with a Greek Pluto. The title itself of *Theos Megas* is a euphemism for “the Lord of the underground world”, identified with Pluto in the Greek mythology; according to B. Pick, « the Great God» of Odessos is a deity of chthonian origin. The German scholar underlines that the god’s depiction on the bronze coins of Odessos, reclined, is typical to chthonian deities, while the cornucopia, its attribute, characterises the same deities worshipped as providers of abundance<sup>4</sup>. The Thracian name *Derzelas* which *Theos Megas* was given in Roman times does not question the Greek origin of its cult. The bearded rider holding the cornucopia, depicted on the coins of Odessos, is

<sup>1</sup> IGB I<sup>2</sup>, 47, l. 4 (215 ap. J.-C.); IGB I<sup>2</sup>, 47 bis, l. 2-3 (221 ap. J.-C.); IGB I<sup>2</sup>, 48, l. 2-3 (238 ap. J.-C.); see also Robert 1959, 210-211.

<sup>2</sup> Odessos had been founded by Milesian colonists around 570-560 BC, see Tsetsckhladze 2019, 30 (Table 6); Avram, Hind, Tsetsckhladze 2004, 936, n° 689 (s.u. “Odessos”).

<sup>3</sup> Pick 1898, 155.

<sup>4</sup> Pick 1898, 158-162; Pick, Regling 1910, I, 2, 523.

interpreted by B. Pick as a representation of the Thracian deity, which, by assimilation, overtook the Great God's attribute<sup>5</sup>.

Michael Rostovtzeff underlines the Thracian origin and chthonian nature of Theos Megas. In this regard, the Russian scholar recalls the god's Thracian name (Derzelas), attested by Roman date inscriptions, as well as its syncretism with the Thracian Horseman, revealed on coins and reliefs<sup>6</sup>. According to M. Rostovtzeff, Theos Megas's effigy figured on the coins of Odessos is a « Hellenised representation » of the Thracian origin Great God. Equally, M. Rostovtzeff emphasises that iconographic features specific to the Greek chthonian deities are found in the iconographic depictions of Theos Megas on the coins minted by Odessos<sup>7</sup>.

Bengt Hemberg believes that the depiction of Theos Megas under a Hellenic iconographic type does not imply that the Great God would have been an authentic Greek deity; in his view, the Thracian origin of Theos Megas would be suggested by its Thracian name, Derzelas / Derzalas, as well as by the title of *Theos Megas* itself. Furthermore, B. Hemberg considers that *Theos Megas* of Odessos was assimilated with *Theoi Megaloi*, given the epithet resemblance of the two deities<sup>8</sup>.

Adolf Michaelis, followed by Tran Tam Tinh, identified the bearded god wearing the *kalathos*, portrayed on imperial date coins from Odessos, with Sarapis<sup>9</sup>.

Zlatozara Gočeva erroneously recognises Theos Megas of Odessos – deity which, in her view, had been introduced in the city's pantheon during the 2nd century BC – as the Thracian god Derzelas / Darzalas worshipped in north-eastern Thrace. According to the Bulgarian scholar, during the Roman period, the latter would have been assimilated with the Great God of Odessos owing to increased influence that the Thracian populace had in the Greek colony. Z. Gočeva seeks the origins of Theos Megas in Asia Minor<sup>10</sup>.

J. Żelazowski infers that Theos Megas is a deity established in the Hellenistic period, similarly to Sarapis; the cult of the Great God does not go beyond the period when it is attested on the tetradrachms of Odessos<sup>11</sup>.

Hypotheses above expressed in reference to Theos Megas's origin are far from convincing. Nevertheless, there is a single point of consensus among the scholars: the chthonian nature of the Great God, expressed by the iconographical type adopted for its depictions. Scholars plead for either his Greek or Thracian or syncretic origin of *Theos Megas*. Which results rather clearly from above theories is the that the Great God is a mixture of elements, Greek (name *Theos Megas*), Thracian (name *Derzelas* and assimilation with the Thracian Rider) and that the cult persisted during the time of the Roman empire. However, the development phases of this deity's cult are impossible to restore: is it a Thracian origin god, sieved through the Greek filter and delivered to the Roman world (evolutionist vision)? Or is it an identitarian improvisation of Hellenistic or imperial date?

## 2. The name *Theos Megas*

The name *Theos Megas* is ambiguous. The term "Theos" had been frequently used to designate either esoteric deities, whose names were not disclosed<sup>12</sup> or composite divine entities<sup>13</sup>. Furthermore, *Theos* was used to invoke the god or announce its epiphany<sup>14</sup>.

The epiclases *Megas* ("Great") and *Megistos* ("the Greatest") are rarely associated with traditional Greek gods. These epiclases were widespread in the East, particularly in Egypt and at Babylon. Numerous Egyptian deities wore the epiclesis *Megas* or *Megistos*<sup>15</sup>; the two epiclases had been adopted in the Greek world during the 4th century BC to designate a non-Greek origin deity. That is why Sarapis,

<sup>5</sup> Pick 1898, 157; see also Chiekova 2008, 196-197.

<sup>6</sup> *Apud* Chiekova 2008, 197.

<sup>7</sup> Rostovtzeff 1911, 4, 14, 24 *apud* Chiekova 2008, 197, n. 80 et 81.

<sup>8</sup> Hemberg 1950, 224-231, in particular 226-227.

<sup>9</sup> Michaelis 1885, 287-318; see also Tinh 1983, 54-55; III 25, 27, 29 and 29 bis in the catalogue; fig. 112, 115-117.

<sup>10</sup> Gočeva 1998, 91-100.

<sup>11</sup> Żelazowski 1992, 35-51.

<sup>12</sup> Burkert 1985, 272.

<sup>13</sup> Baslez 1977, 127.

<sup>14</sup> Burkert 1985, 272; see also Alexandrescu-Vianu 1999-2001, 74.

<sup>15</sup> Parker 2017, 105; see also Alexandrescu-Vianu 1999-2001, 75.

once adopted by the Greek, had been often called *Theos Megas*. Epiclesis *Megas* had been applied to the Great Gods of Samothrake (Θεοί Μεγάλοι), as well as to Cybele (Μεγάλη Μήτηρ)<sup>16</sup>.

Since the 4th century BC, Zeus *Megistos*, which likely assimilated an indigenous Zeus, is recorded at Iasos, in Caria<sup>17</sup>. Another Zeus, termed *Theos Megas* appears in Phrygia. At Caistros, in Cilicia, were discovered forty-one votive inscriptions offered to Zeus, called either *Theos Megas* or simply Zeus or Zeus *Megas*. *Megistos*, which Pausanias identifies with Zeus, was the name of the main deity of the city of Boulis in Phocis<sup>18</sup>. Therefore, on many occasions, the epicleses *Megas* or *Megistos* associated to Zeus's name designated local non-Greek deities assimilated with the Greek Zeus; the same epicleses are worn by a series of purely Greek deities, namely Asclepios, Dionysos, Pluton or Poseidon<sup>19</sup>, whose commonality was their chthonian nature. Unfortunately, the name *Theos Megas* supplies no indication on the nature of the deity<sup>20</sup>.

### 3. The attestations of Theos Megas at Odessos during the Hellenistic period

At Odessos, *Theos Megas* is attested by three source classes: plastic art representations (figurines), coinage and inscriptions. Coins are the main iconographic source on the studied deity. During the Hellenistic period, *Theos Megas* is recorded at Odessos by a few plastic art representations and particularly, by coinage.

A series of fragmentarily surviving terracotta figurines dated to the 4th – 3rd century BC that had been discovered in the graves from the southern cemetery at Odessos, confirm the age of Theos Megas's worship at Odessos. One of these figurines depicts a bearded god, rendered standing, wearing a *chiton* and *himation*, holding a cornucopia in the left hand and a patera in the right<sup>21</sup>; this figurine resembles the image of Theos Megas portrayed on the reverse of silver tetradrachms dated to the second half of the 2nd century BC<sup>22</sup>, most definitely depicting the Great God protector of Odessos<sup>23</sup>. Only the bearded heads of the figure survived from the other figurines, which made its identification unsecure. Regardless, these terracotta figurines discovered in the cemetery at Odessos prove that a private cult was in place for Theos Megas as early as the beginning of the Hellenistic period<sup>24</sup>.

The image of a bearded god, reclining on a *klinè* and holding a cornucopia is depicted on a lead weight from Odessos or Dionysopolis, dated by late 2nd – early 1st century BC<sup>25</sup>.

#### 3.1. The iconographic representations of Theos Megas on coinage from Odessos

The oldest coin issues depicting Theos Megas are the autonomous coins struck by Odessos between the 3rd century and 1st century BC. Depending on the god's representation type, these coins may be divided into three classes:

1. The first class consists of silver tetradrachms on which the god is rendered standing, holding the cornucopia in the left hand and the patera in the right; on the coin reverse, the explanatory legend ΘΕΟΥ ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ is inscribed;
2. The second class is composed of bronze coins, on which the god is rendered reclined, holding a patera in the right hand and a cornucopia in the left;
3. The third class is represented by the bronze coins depicting the god on horseback, advancing right, with the head covered by a *kausia* and dressed in a chlamys. The rider holds a cornucopia or a spear. In this case, this would be a deity akin or even identical with the Great God.

The first class of coin issues consists of two silver tetradrachms minted at Odessos in the second half of the 2nd century BC; the two coins are the main iconographic source on *Theos Megas*. The image

<sup>16</sup> Parker 2017, 141.

<sup>17</sup> Laumonier 1958, 599; see also Parker 2017, 107.

<sup>18</sup> Pausanias, X, 37, 3, (p. 291).

<sup>19</sup> Parker 2017, 144-145.

<sup>20</sup> For the name *Theos Megas*, see Alexandrescu-Vianu 2005, 131-132; Alexandrescu-Vianu 1999-2001, 74-75.

<sup>21</sup> Żelazowski 1994, 919, n° 1.

<sup>22</sup> See *infra*.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Chiekova 2008, 183.

<sup>24</sup> Chiekova, 183-184 et n. 24; see also Żelazowski 1992, 36.

<sup>25</sup> The lead weight was discovered in the Hellenistic settlement nearby village Rogačevo, between Odessos and Dionysopolis, however closer to Odessos, see Lazarov 1992-1993, 77-84, especially p. 80, Abb. 3.

of a bearded god, with the hair bound in a taenia is figured on the obverse of the two coins<sup>26</sup> (Fig. 1.1). The reverse of the same coins portray a bearded god rendered from front, standing, head left; he wears a long *himation*<sup>27</sup> or a *chiton*, holding a cornucopia in the left hand and a libation-cup in the right; the god's image is accompanied by legends ΘΕΟΥ ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ ΟΔΗΣΙΤΩΝ and ΘΕΟΥ ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ ΟΔΗ(-) rendering the name of *Theos Megas* and the city's ethnicity, as well as the name of the magistrate under whom the two coins were issued, ΚΥΡΣΑ<sup>28</sup> (Fig. 1.2; Fig. 1.3). The god's name, *Theos Megas* appears for the first time in the Genitive on the reverse of the two tetradrachms. The Genitive of the divine appellative (THEOU MEGALOU) indicates that the city of Odessos had consecrated this coin issue to Theos Megas, its protecting deity. B. Pick believes that the city of Odessos struck the coins in order to commemorate the military victory of the Odessitans against the Scordisci in 113 BC<sup>29</sup>. The depiction of Theos Megas on the Odessian tetradrachms would remain, with a few changes, the standard image of the god even during the Roman period, which made some scholars assume this depiction of the "Great God" reproduces the cult statue of the deity (ἄγαλμα) located in its temple at Odessos<sup>30</sup>.



Fig. 1. Silver tetradrachms of Odessos (second half of the 2nd century BC), *apud* Pick & Regling 1910, I, 2, 524, 549-550, no. 2214-2215, pl. IV, 1, 2.

1. Obverse: Face of a bearded god, hair in taenia.
2. Reverse: Theos Megas standing, holding cornucopia in left hand and a libation cup in the right; legend ΘΕΟΥ ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ ΟΔΗ(-).
3. Reverse: Theos Megas standing, holding cornucopia in left hand and a libation cup in the right; legend ΘΕΟΥ ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ ΟΔΗΣΙΤΩΝ.

The second coinage class is composed of bronze coins, rendering a reclined god, holding the cornucopia. B. Pick identified Theos Megas on the reverse of the bronze coins issued at Odessos, dating, according to the German numismatist, to the 4th century BC: the bearded Great God is depicted reclined on a stone base, holding a patera in the right hand and a cornucopia in the left. A torch is figured in the left upper field of the coin. On the stone base is incised ethnicity ΟΔΗΣΙΤΩΝ (Fig. 2.1). The obverse of the same coins renders the head of a goddess wearing a headband, an earring and a necklace<sup>31</sup> or, according to other interpretations, the head of Apollo<sup>32</sup>. The coin dating suggested by B. Pick (the 4th century BC) is disputed by D. Draganov, who placed the beginning of the autonomous coinage issues of

<sup>26</sup> Pick, Regling 1910, I, 2, 524, 549-550, nos. 2214-2215, pl. IV, 1, 2.

<sup>27</sup> Alexandrescu-Vianu 2005, 129; Alexandrescu-Vianu 1999-2001, 73.

<sup>28</sup> Pick, Regling 1910, I, 2, p. 524, 549-550, nos. 2214-2215, pl. IV, 1, 2.

<sup>29</sup> Pick, Regling 1910, 520; in the same sense, B. Pick evokes a coin issue stamped at Istros in honour of Apollon by the recipient of an honorific degree, Aristagoras son of Apatourios (*ISM* I, 54), to commemorate a military victory of the Histrians. However, such identification seems rather arbitrary. The same B. Pick mentions a series of coin issues of other poleis in the honour of their main and protecting deities, which bear the polis ethnicity beside the name of the god in the Genitive: the polis of Maroneia (ΜΑΡΩΝΙΤΩΝ with ΔΙΟΝΥΣΟΥ ΣΩΤΗΡΟΣ) and city of Thasos (ΘΑΣΙΩΝ with ΗΡΑΚΛΕΟΥΣ ΣΩΤΗΡΟΣ), see Pick 1898, 155.

<sup>30</sup> Chiekova 2008, 180 and n. 4 with comments and bibliographical references; the temple of Theos Megas Derzelas from Odessos is represented on the reverse of a bronze coin struck by the polis under Gordian III (238-244), in this respect see Alexandrescu 2005, 186.

<sup>31</sup> Pick, Regling 1910, 522-523, 541-542, nos. 2177-2184, pl. IV, 4-7.

<sup>32</sup> *Apud* Chiekova 2008, 180 and no. 6.

Odessos after the demise of Lysimachos, more specifically sometime between 281-270 BC; D. Draganov frames to the same period the identical counterstamp – a bearded god depicted reclined – emerging on bronze coins of type Philip II, Alexander and Lysimachos<sup>33</sup>.

The same bearded god, yet this time without the cornucopia, is depicted reclined on the reverse of other bronze coins from Odessos, dated to the 3rd century BC (Fig. 2.2). The obverse type of this coinage variation without the cornucopia remains the same: the head of a goddess (or Apollo?)<sup>34</sup>. On the reverse on other bronze coins from the same polis, dated by B. Pick to the 2nd century – first half of the 1st century BC, the god is depicted reclined, holding a cornucopia in the left hand (Fig. 2.3). The obverse of the same coins figures this time Apollo's laurel embellished head<sup>35</sup>.



Fig. 2. Bronze coins of Odessos. Theos Megas depicted reclined (the 3rd – 1st century BC).

1. Reverse: Theos Megas reclined, holding cornucopia in left hand (281-270 BC); ethnicity ΟΔΗΣΙΤΩΝ is incised in the stone base on which the god sits reclining, *apud* Pick & Regling 1910, 522-523, 541-542, no. 2177-2184, Pl. IV, 4-7.
2. Reverse: Theos Megas reclined, without cornucopia (the 3rd century BC), *apud* Pick & Regling 1910, I, 2, 522-523, no. 2185-2188, Pl. IV, 5 et 6.
3. Reverse: Theos Megas reclined, holding cornucopia in left hand (2nd century – first half of the 1st century BC), *apud* Pick & Regling 1910, 522-523, no. 2191-2198, Pl. IV, 10-12.

Identification with *Theos Megas* of the god represented reclined on the bronze coins of Odessos is contested by J. Źelazowski; accordingly, the beard and cornucopia are not specific attributes of the Great God, which allow recognition on these bronze coin issues of the same deity figured on the silver tetradrachms dated to the second half of the 2nd century BC<sup>36</sup>. In this regard, we agree with D. Chiekova's view, according to whom similarities between the Great God depicted reclined on the bronze coins and that of the god rendered standing figured on the silver tetradrachms cannot be ignored, and in particular the presence of his attribute, the cornucopia, even though the attribute is specific to many other deities<sup>37</sup>. It is very likely that the bronze coin issues of Odessos depict the Great God, whose image emerges on both the silver coin issue minted during the second half of the 2nd century BC, as well as on Roman date coins<sup>38</sup>. In favour of the identity between the god represented reclined, holding the cornucopia and *Theos Megas* pleads the fact that the same reverse type is found on coins struck by Odessos during the imperial period in parallel with the image of the Great God depicted standing, similar to that on the silver tetradrachms<sup>39</sup>. Otherwise, in the imperial period, the prominence of *Theos Megas* in the Odessitan pantheon is further confirmed by epigraphic documents.

The iconographic file of the Great God of Odessos is completed by a third class of coin depictions, which was termed by B. Pick as "God on horseback" ("Mit dem reitenden Gott")<sup>40</sup>, emerging on the bronze coins

<sup>33</sup> Draganov 1990, 19-25 (non vidi!), *apud* Chiekova 2008, 180-181.

<sup>34</sup> Pick, Regling 1910, I, 2, 522-523, nos. 2185-2188, Pl. IV, 5 et 6. These coins are classified by B. Pick in a separate group and are dated to the 3rd century BC; instead, D. Draganov interprets these as a variation of a coin type with cornucopia, Draganov 1990, 19-25 (non vidi!), *apud* Chiekova 2008, 181, n. 8.

<sup>35</sup> Pick, Regling 1910, 522-523, nos. 2191-2198, Pl. IV, 10-12; cf. Draganov 1990, 23, who dates this coin series to the 3rd century BC, *apud* Chiekova 2008, 181, n. 9.

<sup>36</sup> Źelazowski 1992, 35-51, particularly p. 47.

<sup>37</sup> Chiekova 2008, 181.

<sup>38</sup> Pick, Regling 1910, I, 2, 522-525, nos. 2177-2215.

<sup>39</sup> Chiekova 2008, 181-182.

<sup>40</sup> Pick, Regling 1910, I, 2, 547, nos. 2200-2213, group termed B. ("Mit dem reitenden Gott").

dated to the 3rd – 1st century BC. The reverse of these coins portrays a god or hero on horseback, advancing right, in a double stance: holding a cornucopia or a spear<sup>41</sup>.

The reverse of 3rd century BC bronze coins renders a bearded rider advancing right, wearing a *kausia* on the head and chlamys; the rider holds a cornucopia in the right hand. In the lower part of the coins is incised ethnicity ΟΔΗΣΙΤΩΝ (Fig. 3.2). In this case, the deity could be akin or even identical with the Great God. The profile image of a bearded god wearing a laurel wreath on the head is figured on the obverse of the same coin issue (Fig. 3.1)<sup>42</sup>.

The reverse of another series of bronze coins minted by Odessos, dated by B. Pick by late 2nd - early 1st century BC, depicts a bearded rider on galloping horse, holding a spear instead of the cornucopia (Fig. 3.4); in the lower part of the coin is incised ethnicity ΟΔΗΣΙ / ΟΔΗΣΕΙ. The face of a bearded god, wearing a wreath or a hairband is shown on the obverse of the same coins (Fig. 3.3)<sup>43</sup>.

### 3.2. Assimilation of Theos Megas with the Thracian Horseman on the Odessitan coins

One begs the question whether the two coinage depiction types of Odessos, described above, represent Theos Megas or the Thracian Rider, whose worship in this polis is recorded as early as the Hellenistic period<sup>44</sup>, and which would have adopted the beard and cornucopia, attributes by excellence of the Great God.

Z. Gočeva believes that the iconographic representation of the Thracian Horseman on the bronze coins issued by Odessos is very different from that common emerging on monuments erected in the honour of the deity<sup>45</sup>. This view is shared by J. Żelazowski, who underlines that images on the Odessitan coins are rather the equestrian depiction of the Great God than the adoption of his attributes by the Thracian Horseman<sup>46</sup>.

It is difficult to establish with certainty which deity is figured on the bronze coins of Odessos: is the Great God or the Thracian Rider assimilated to the first? In this respect, we agree that the bearded rider holding a cornucopia is an equestrian stance of Theos Megas (Fig. 3.2). In fact, the cornucopia, an iconographic attribute specific to the Great God is also figured on the reverse of the bronze coins minted



Fig. 3. Bronze coins of Odessos. Theos Megas depicted on horseback (the 3rd – 1st century BC)  
 1. Obverse: Profile of a bearded god wearing a laurel wreath (the 3rd century BC), *apud* Pick & Regling 1910, I, 2, 524, 547-548, no. 2200-2208. Pl. IV, 13.  
 2. Reverse: Theos Megas on horseback, holding the cornucopia in right hand (3rd century BC), *apud* Pick & Regling 1910, I, 2, 524, 547-548, no. 2200-2208. Pl. IV, 13.  
 3. Obverse: Face of a bearded god, wearing a wreath or hairband (late 2nd century – early 1st century BC) *apud* Pick & Regling 1910, I, 2, 524, 548-549, no. 2210-2212, Pl. IV, 15.  
 4. Reverse: Theos Megas riding on galloping horse, holding a spear in right hand (late 2nd century – early 1st century BC) *apud* Pick & Regling 1910, I, 2, 524, 548-549, nr. 2210-2212, Pl. IV, 15.

<sup>41</sup> Pick, Regling 1910, I, 2, 548, no. 2210, Pl. IV 15.

<sup>42</sup> Pick, Regling 1910, I, 2, 524, 547-548, nos. 2200-2208. Pl. IV, 13.

<sup>43</sup> Pick, Regling 1910, I, 2, 524, 548-549, nos. 2210-2212, Pl. IV, 15; on the obverse of coins nos. 2210 and 2211, the wreath is replaced with a hairband.

<sup>44</sup> Most scholars plead for the Thracian origin of this deity. In the Roman period, the Thracian Horseman becomes the most popular deity in Thrace. Thousands of reliefs and figurines render the image of the deity, which is also reproduced on coinage. The cult origins of the Thracian Horseman harks back to early 4th century BC. This cult endures until late 4th century AD, when it is replaced by Christianity see Kirov 2020, 172-186, especially 182-183.

<sup>45</sup> Gočeva 1998, 91-100.

<sup>46</sup> Żelazowski 1992, 46 and 47; see also Chiekova 2008, 182.

by Odessos in the 2nd century and early 1st century BC<sup>47</sup>. Instead, the image of the bearded rider holding a spear suggests a possible assimilation between the figure of the Great God and that of the Thracian Rider, or more likely, an equestrian depiction of Theos Megas (Fig. 3.4).

#### 4. Theos Megas Derzelas depictions at Odessos during the imperial period

During the imperial period, Theos Megas is assimilated with Derzelas/Derzalas/Darzalas, a local deity originating from north-eastern Thrace, as indicated by the epigraphic documents mentioning the Great Polyad Deity of the Odessitans under the name *Theos Megas Derzelas*<sup>48</sup>. The Thracian origin of name Derzelas is undisputable<sup>49</sup>. Name Derzelas corresponds to the god's standard image, as attested by a marble votive relief placed in honour of Darzalas<sup>50</sup> discovered at Târgoviște. This relief renders Derzelas standing front, dressed in a long chiton and a chlamys thrown over the left shoulder. The god is long haired, wearing a beard and moustache, holding a large cornucopia in the left hand and a patera in the right positioned over a lit rectangular altar<sup>51</sup>.

The figured monuments of Odessos, dated to the imperial period, rendering *Theos Megas Derzalas*, are clearly influenced by the iconographic types of Theos Megas and the Thracian Horseman. Depending the iconographic features, these figured monuments are classified in two iconographic types. The inscribed votive relief of Târgoviște presenting the standard image of Theos Megas Derzelas frames in the first iconographic type, well known through the god's depictions on the coinage minted at Odessos. The reliefs in the second iconographic type portray the Great God as an equestrian, with his attributes, the beard and cornucopia<sup>52</sup>.

##### 4.1. The epigraphic attestations of Theos Megas Derzelas

At Odessos, several inscriptions attest the name Theos Megas Derzelas, which in fact takes prominence in the city's pantheon.

Three epebe registers of the 3rd century BC discovered at Odessos are simultaneously dated through Roman consuls and the mention of the city's eponymous priests, whose office had been undertaken by Theos Megas Derzelas himself: "... ἰερωμένου Θεοῦ Μεγάλου Δερζελα τὸ δι'..."<sup>53</sup> ("... during the eponymous priesthood held by Great God Derzelas for the fourteenth time ..."); "... ἰερωμένου Θεοῦ Μεγάλου Δερζελα τὸ πεντεκαίδεκατον..."<sup>54</sup> ("during the eponymous priesthood held by Great God Derzelas for the fifteenth time"); Θεοῦ Μεγάλου Δερζελα τὸ [(*numerus*) μηνὸς ----- ἔβδόμη]<sup>55</sup> (« [during the eponymous priesthood held by] the Great God Derzelas for [(*numerus*) the seventh day of month ----- ]).

The second of the previously mentioned three epebe registers attest a priest of Theos Megas Derzelas, exercising concurrently priesthood offices for Athena and Heracles as well: « the first amongst the epebes, leader and head M(arcus) Aurelius Attes, son of Dionysios, son of the elected priest of Great God Derzelas and Athena and Heracles »<sup>56</sup>; the inscription text infers that Great God Derzelas's eponymy had ended once with the election of this new priest<sup>57</sup>.

The Great God had exercised for fourteen times the city's eponymy office, which is relevant evidence on the importance of this cult at Odessos. The eponymy office was ascribed to god Derzelas at a time when the polis struggled with financial difficulties, since the office involved considerable costs on the part of its holder. In the event that eponymy could not be assumed by a citizen owing to local financial hardships, it was symbolically ascribed to a deity of the polis, being in fact supported by its temple and priest.

<sup>47</sup> Pick & Regling 1910, I, 2, 525, nos. 2216, 2217, 2219, 2220, 2222a, Pl. IV, 16, 18.

<sup>48</sup> Gočeva 1986b, 354; see also Želazowski 1994, 918.

<sup>49</sup> Chiekova 2008, 184.

<sup>50</sup> IGB II, 768: « [Κ]υρίω Δαρζαλα Τούρβων / βου(λευτή)· εὐχαριστήριν ἀνέ-/ [θ]ηκεν ».

<sup>51</sup> Gočeva 1986b, 354, A, n° 1.

<sup>52</sup> Gočeva 1986b, 354.

<sup>53</sup> IGB I<sup>2</sup>, 47, l. 4 (215 ap. J.-C.).

<sup>54</sup> IGB I<sup>2</sup>, 47 bis, l. 2-3 (221 ap. J.-C.).

<sup>55</sup> IGB I<sup>2</sup>, 48, l. 2-3 (238 ap. J.-C.); see also Robert 1959, 210-211.

<sup>56</sup> IGB I<sup>2</sup>, 47 bis, r. 7-9: « ὁ πρῶτος τῶν ἐφήβων καὶ πρωτοστάτης καὶ ἐφήβαρχος Μ(ἄρκος) Αὐρή-/λιος Ἄττης Διονουσίου, υἱὸς τοῦ αἰρεθέντος ἱερέως Θεοῦ Μεγάλου Δερζελα / καὶ Ἀθηναῖα καὶ Ἡρακλέους, κτλ. »; see also Robert, Robert 1972, 432, no. 300.

<sup>57</sup> Robert, Robert 1972, 432, no. 300.



Fig. 4. Bronze coins of Odessos. Theos Megas Derzelas depicted standing (Roman period)

1. Reverse: Theos Megas standing facing, head left, holding patera in right hand and cornucopia in left; ΘΑΥΡΑΝΤΙΝΟΝ (Trajan's rule) (*apud* <https://rpc.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/search/browse?q=Theos%20Megas&page=1>).
2. Reverse: Theos Megas standing facing, head left, holding patera in right hand and cornucopia in left; ΘΑΥΡΑΝΤΙΝΟΝ (*apud* <https://rpc.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/search/browse?q=Theos%20Megas&page=1>).
3. Reverse: Theos Megas standing, left(?), holding patera (over lit altar?) and cornucopia; ΘΑΥΡΑΝΤΙΝΟΝ (the reign of Antoninus Pius) (*apud* <https://rpc.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/search/browse?q=Theos%20Megas&page=1>).
4. Reverse: Theos Megas standing, facing, (head left,) holding patera and cornucopia; ΘΑΥΡΑΝΤΙΝΟΝ (the rule of Commodus) (*apud* <https://rpc.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/search/browse?q=Theos%20Megas&page=1>).
5. Reverse: Theos Megas standing facing, head left, holding cornucopia and patera; ΘΑΥΡΑΝΤΙΝΟΝ (the rule of Elagabalus) (*apud* <https://rpc.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/search/browse?q=Theos%20Megas&page=1>).
6. Reverse: Theos Megas standing facing, head left, holding cornucopia and patera over lit altar; ΘΑΥΡΑΝΤΙΝΟΝ (the rule of Elagabalus) (*apud* <https://rpc.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/search/browse?q=Theos%20Megas&page=1>).
7. Reverse: Theos Megas standing left, holding patera over altar and cornucopia; ΘΑΥΡΑΝΤΙΝΟΝ (the reign of Gordian III) (*apud* <https://rpc.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/search/browse?q=Theos%20Megas&page=2>).
8. Reverse: Theos Megas standing left, holding patera over altar and cornucopia; ΘΑΥΡΑΝΤΙΝΟΝ (the reign of Gordian III) (*apud* <https://rpc.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/search/browse?q=Theos%20Megas&page=2>).
9. Reverse: Theos Megas standing left, holding patera over altar and cornucopia against shoulder; ΘΑΥΡΑΝΤΙΝΟΝ (the reign of Gordian III) (*apud* <https://rpc.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/search/browse?q=Theos%20Megas&page=2>).

#### 4.2. Iconographic depictions of Theos Megas Derzelas on the coinage of Odessos

The image of Theos Megas Derzelas appears on almost all coins struck at Odessos during the imperial period: in a first stance, the god is rendered standing, from front, holding a cornucopia in the left hand and a patera in the right (Fig. 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 4.4, 4.5, 4.6, 4.7, 4.8, 4.9)<sup>58</sup>; in a second stance, the Great God is rendered reclined on a *klinè* with a cornucopia in the hand (Fig. 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 5.4, 5.5)<sup>59</sup>. The cornucopia and a grape cluster appear on the reverse of a coin issued under Domitian<sup>60</sup>. The image of a bearded rider holding a spear suggests a possible assimilation between the figure of the Great God and that of the Thracian Horseman or more likely, an equestrian representation of Theos Megas<sup>61</sup>.

<sup>58</sup> Pick, Regling 1910, I, 2, 526-528, no. 2227 (Trajan); no. 2233 (Hadrian); no. 2240 (Antoninus Pius); no. 2247 (Marcus Aurelius); no. 2250, Pl. XIII, 25, no. 2251 (Commodus); no. 2259 (Severus Alexander); no. 2260-2264, 2271, Pl. V, 1, no. 2281-2288 (Caracalla); no. 2289-2302 (Geta Augustus); no. 2291-2302 (Elagabalus); no. 2309, 2311 (Severus Alexander); no. 2314, Pl. V, 5, no. 2318, Pl. V, 2, no. 2319 et 2320 (Gordian III).

<sup>59</sup> Pick & Regling 1910, I, 2, n° 2232, Pl. IV, 23 (Trajan); n° 2239 (Hadrian); no. 2244 et 2244a (Antoninus Pius); no. 2247 (Marcus Aurelius); <https://rpc.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/search/browse?q=Theos%20Megas&page=1>.

<sup>60</sup> Pick, Regling 1910, I, 2, no. 2226, Pl. IV, 22.

<sup>61</sup> Pick, Regling 1910, I, 2, no. 2243 (Antoninus Pius); no. 2269, Pl. IV, 25 (Severus Alexander).

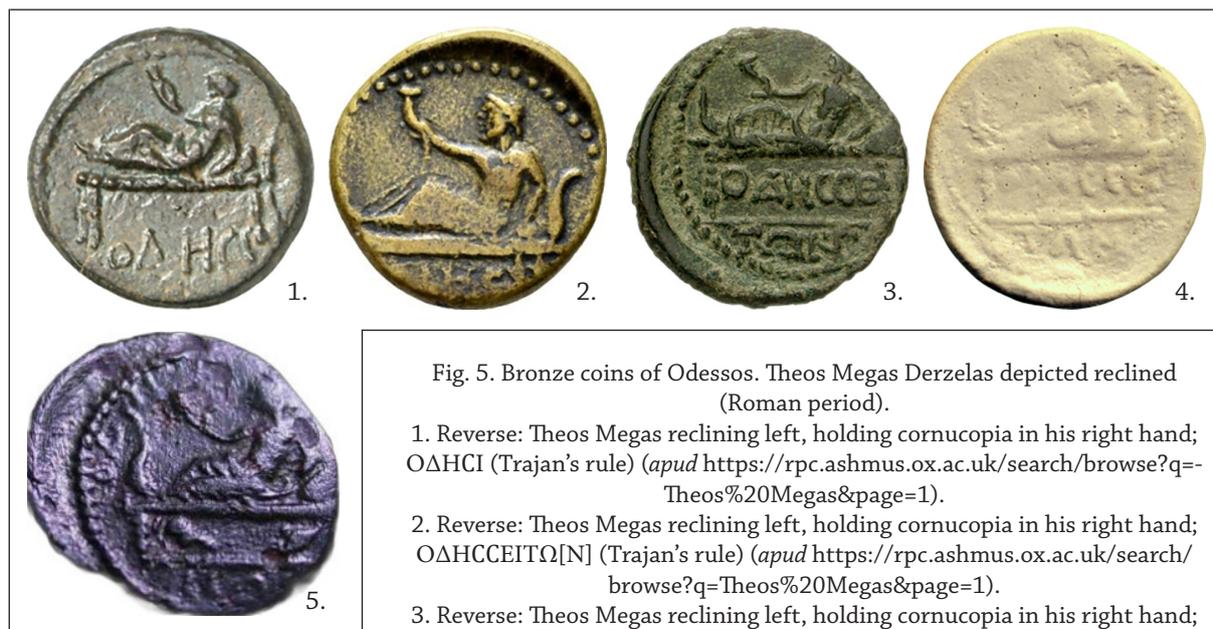


Fig. 5. Bronze coins of Odessos. Theos Megas Derzelas depicted reclined (Roman period).

1. Reverse: Theos Megas reclining left, holding cornucopia in his right hand; OΔHCI (Trajan's rule) (*apud* <https://rpc.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/search/browse?q=Theos%20Megas&page=1>).
2. Reverse: Theos Megas reclining left, holding cornucopia in his right hand; OΔHCCEITΩ[N] (Trajan's rule) (*apud* <https://rpc.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/search/browse?q=Theos%20Megas&page=1>).
3. Reverse: Theos Megas reclining left, holding cornucopia in his right hand; OΔHCCEITΩN (Hadrian's rule) (*apud* <https://rpc.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/search/browse?q=Theos%20Megas&page=1>).
4. Reverse: Theos Megas reclining on a base, left, holding cornucopia(?), resting arm on cushion; OΔHCCEITΩN (in two lines on base) (the reign of Antoninus Pius) (*apud* <https://rpc.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/search/browse?q=Theos%20Megas&page=1>).
5. Reverse: Theos Megas reclining on a base, left, holding patera(?) and cornucopia, resting arm on cushion; to left, amphora (?); OΔHCCEITΩN (the reign of Marcus Aurelius) (*apud* <https://rpc.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/search/browse?q=Theos%20Megas&page=1>).

Starting with Septimius Severus (193-211) until Gordian III (238-244), a new dress accessory adds to the god's standard image: the *kalathos*. The god's depictions wearing a *kalathos* on the head, emerging on Roman coins minted at Odessos starting with the rule of Septimius Sever, suggest either a contamination of the Great God with Sarapis or its identification with Sarapis himself<sup>62</sup>. On the obverse of coins struck under Gordian III, the bust of a bearded god, wearing a *kalathos*, near which lay a cornucopia, is figured in front the emperor's bust<sup>63</sup> (Fig. 6.1). A. Michaelis, followed by V. Tran Tam Tinh<sup>64</sup>, identifies the bearded god, who wears a *kalathos*, with Sarapis<sup>65</sup>, while B. Pick recognizes the Great God in this deity, based on its attribute, the cornucopia, which is depicted nearby<sup>66</sup>. In this regard, we agree with D. Chiekova's view who believed that "B. Pick's understanding is pertinent to the extent to which on some coins issued under Gordian III, the Egyptian god emerges in the common iconographic type, with right arm raised and holding a sceptre in the left hand<sup>67</sup>, while in parallel, on other coin issues, the Great God is present"<sup>68</sup>.

The new dress accessory – *kalathos*<sup>69</sup> – that nears Theos Megas's iconography to that of Sarapis, is perfectly inscribed in the religious concerns of Septimius Severus, who was peculiarly interested in the cult of Sarapis<sup>70</sup>. The cult of Theos Megas thus becomes official in the Roman period.

<sup>62</sup> Pick, Regling 1910, I, 2, no. 2263, 2264, 2271, pl. V, 1, 2 (Sévère); n° 2281. The Great God standing, wearing a *kalathos* emerges on a series of coins issued under emperors Caracalla and Elagabalus, see Pick & Regling 1910, I, 2, no. 2282-2286 (Caracalla Auguste); no. 2289, 2290 (Elagabalus).

<sup>63</sup> Żelazowski 1994, 919, no. 5.

<sup>64</sup> Tinh 1983, 54-55, III, 25, 27, 29, 29 bis du catalogue; fig. 112, 115-117.

<sup>65</sup> Michaelis 1885, 287-318.

<sup>66</sup> Pick, Regling 1910, I, 2, n° 2325-2374.

<sup>67</sup> Pick 1898, 156; Pick, Regling 1910, I, 2, Pl. XIII, 23.

<sup>68</sup> Pick, Regling 1910, I, 2, Pl. V, 2.

<sup>69</sup> Theos Megas is depicted with a *kalathos* on the coin issues of Odessos and Istros. Theos Megas wearing a *kalathos* also emerges on a series of coins struck at Dionysopolis, dating to the period comprised between the reign of Septimius Severus and that of Gordian III. The introduction of the *kalathos* in Theos Megas's iconography occurs simultaneously at Istros and Odessos, see Peter 2005, 111.

<sup>70</sup> *Historia Augusta*, Severus XVII, 4, (p. 410): "Multa praeterea his iura mutavit. Iucundam sibi peregrinationem hanc propter religionem dei Serapidis et propter rerum antiquarum cognitionem et propter novitatem animalium vel locorum fuisse

The widespread image of the Great God on imperial date coins reinforces the idea of an existing temple that would have been consecrated to god Derzelas at Odessos<sup>71</sup>. In fact, the reverse of a series of bronze coins struck by this polis under Gordian III renders a four-column temple, in front of which is figured the cult statue of a standing male deity, covered with a long chiton, wearing a *kalathos*, holding a patera in the right hand under an altar and in the left a cornucopia<sup>72</sup> (Fig. 6.2); depending on the iconographic depiction, this male deity may be likely equated with *Theos Megas Derzelas*. According to Petre Alexandrescu's description, the temple of Theos Megas Derzelas rendered on the coins of Odessos "is built on a base embellished with mouldings, while a wide staircase spans its entire façade. It is a prostyle tetrastyle temple (or distyle *in antis*?), with a less clear architectural plan (possibly Doric?), the pediment being decorated with a quadriga seen from front and lavish antefixes. Before the temple sits his altar"<sup>73</sup> (Fig. 6.2).



Fig. 6. Coin struck at Odessos under Gordian III (238-244).

1. Obverse: confronted busts of Gordian III, laureate, draped and cuirassed, right, facing, and Sarapis, draped, left, with cornucopia behind him; ΑΥΤ Κ ΜΑ ΑΝΤ ΓΟΡΔΙΑΝΟΥ. (*apud* <https://rpc.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/search/browse?q=Theos%20Megas&page=2>).

2. Reverse: temple with four columns enclosing Theos Megas standing left, holding patera over altar and cornucopia; on pediment, figure in facing quadriga; ΟΔΗΚΕΙΤΩΝ, Ε (*apud* <https://rpc.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/search/browse?q=Theos%20Megas&page=2>).

## 5. Evidence on the cult of Theos Megas Derzelas at Odessos

The wide diffusion of Theos Megas Derzelas's image on the coins minted at Odessos during the imperial period reinforces the hypothesis of an existing temple in the city, which would have been consecrated to the Great God. Information supplied by a fragmentary inscription supports this hypothesis and implicitly the practice of Theos Megas's cult at Odessos. The anonymous figure mentioned in this inscription had exercised the offices of agoranomos and archon, after having been elected *neōkoros* of the Great God Derzelas pursuant the decision of the People's Council and Assembly: "eo[-----], after having honestly exercised the office of archon and became *neōkoros* of Great God Derzelas under the decision of the Council and Assembly, considering the honour (which he deserves)"<sup>74</sup>. The title of *neokoros* usually designates a lower office in a temple's hierarchy: guardian or sacristan<sup>75</sup>. However, the epigraphic documentation diversifies the attributions and status of the *neokoroi*, which made some scholars believe that the *neokoros* office had become important over the course of time: if early, the title of *neōkoros* would have designated an individual of a lower, subordinate rank, later, it would have been indicative of a high rank official. Numerous inscriptions prove that in many cases, the title of *neōkoros* is a costly liturgy (λειτουργία), yet which also brings honour and praise to the undertaking individual. Most important poleis sanctuaries required a *neōkoros* who would

Severus ipse postea semper ostendit. Nam et Memphim et Memnonen et pyramides et labyrinthum diligenter inspexit".

<sup>71</sup> The Bulgarian scholar M. Mirčev suggests that the temple of Theos Megas Derzelas might be identified with the foundations of a building at Odessos, yet the hypothesis cannot be confirmed, see Mirčev 1967, 25 et 26 *apud* Chiekova 2008, 186, n. 38.

<sup>72</sup> Pick, *Regling* 1910, I, 2, 578, no. 2360, Pl. XX, 18; 586, no. 2403 et 2404: the altar is depicted in front of the temple. The divine figure is not identified by B. Pick, yet for no. 2403, where the reverse renders the four-column temple, the god at the centre is identified by the German numismatist with Sarapis; Gerasimov 1951, 70-71, fig. 122; see also Chiekova 2008, 186 et n. 39 (with recent bibliographical references).

<sup>73</sup> Alexandrescu 2005, 186.

<sup>74</sup> *IGB* I<sup>2</sup>, 230 bis: "εω[-----] / άγοραν[ομή]-σας και άρ-/ξας πιστώσ / και γενόμε-/νος Θεού Μεγ-/άλου Δερ-/ζαλα νεωκό-/ρος υπό βου-/λήσ και δή-/μου τειμήσ / [χάριν -] / [-----]", see also Chiekova 2008, 187.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. *LSJ*, 1172, s.u. νεωκορέω, νεωκόρος: « warden of a temple as a sacred officer; sacristan »; cf. Chantraine 1968, I, 566, s.u. κορέω: « balayer, nettoyer » from where derives the term νεωκόρος designating the "temple guardian"; according to Hesychius, "neōkoros would be the one who cleans and sweeps the temple", see Hesychius, s.u. νεωκόρος: ό τόν ναόν κοσμών. Κορεΐν γάρ τό σαΐρειν έλεγον; cf. Euripide., *Ion.*, 112-115; 121; 792-795; Suda, s.u. κόρη ... νεωκόρος δέ ούχ ό σαΐρών τόν ναόν, άλλ' ό έπιμελούμενος αυτού ("neōkoros would not be the one who sweeps the temple, but the one who attends to it"); Suda, s.u. νεωκόρος: ό τόν ναόν κοσμών και εύπρεπίζων; see also Georgoudi 2005, 57.

have run and officiated religious ceremonials beside a priest or priestess<sup>76</sup>. The inscription of Odessos seems to confirm this hypothesis, as its text shows that the *neokor* of the Great God Derzelas had been invested into office under a decision taken by the Council and Assembly of the People. Therefore, the term *neôkoros* designates an important servant of the cult of Theos Megas at Odessos<sup>77</sup>.

Two Roman date epitaphs mention two priests of the Great God, likely counting among the influential citizens of Odessos. The priest of Theos Megas mentioned in the first epitaph was primary physician and gymnasiarch; he had distinguished himself by his virtues, reason for which he had been awarded the honorific titles of *demophiletos* and *aristeus*: “Asclepiades, son of Apellas, son of Demetrios, primary physician, « loved by the people » [n.a. honorific title], priest of the Great God, gymnasiarch and « noble » [n.a. honorific title] ...”<sup>78</sup>. The priest of the Great God mentioned in the second epitaph bears the title of *εὐποσιάρχης*<sup>79</sup>, term interpreted twofold. On one side, the term *εὐποσιάρχης*, which is a variation of *εὐβοσιάρχης*, derives from *εὐβοσιά* “abundance” and would designate a “an official who supervised city supplies”<sup>80</sup>. On the other hand, *εὐποσιάρχης* may designate “a supervisor of sacred banquets”, an office that seems more natural for the priest of Theos Megas at Odessos<sup>81</sup>.

The cult development of Theos Megas may be traced in particular during the reign of emperor Gordian III (238-244). The Great God’s temple is depicted on coinage issued during the rule of this emperor (Fig. 6.2). Furthermore, a series of coins with agonistic representations dated to the rule of Gordian III attests the games *Δαρζαλεία* consecrated to Theos Megas Darzalas, the polyad deity of Odessos. The obverse of these coins figures the image of the Great God beside that of the emperor (Fig. 7.1), while on the reverse are engraved a victory wreath, two palm fronds, as well as the game name *ΔΑΡΖΑΛΕΙΑ* (Fig. 7.2, 7.3), which derives from the name of the Thracian deity Darzalas/Derzelas<sup>82</sup>. According to B. Pick, the games would have been held in honour of the Great God in the occasion of emperor Gordian’s visit at Odessos<sup>83</sup>. In fact, on the same event, the city would have struck those commemorating coins in the honour of Gordian III, who on his way to the East, had stopped at Odessos. Last but not least, likely still at that time, the polis of Odessos had obtained the right of *neokorie*; the office of *neôkoros* was awarded to the priest of Theos Megas Derzelas<sup>84</sup>. The mention of the *ΔΑΡΖΑΛΕΙΑ* games, on the coinage minted by Odessos highlights particularly the official nature of the cult of Theos Megas Derzelas<sup>85</sup>.

A marble statue base of imperial date contains a decree in the honour of agonothetes Claudius Aquila, who had presided “the great penteteric games” at Odessos: “(May the) gods



Fig. 7. Coin struck at Odessos under Gordian III (238-244), *apud* Pick, Regling 1910, I, 2, nos.: 2370-2372, Pl. V, 3.

1. Obverse: draped busts of Gordian, laureate and cuirassed, and Serapis, wearing calathus and with cornucopia over shoulder, confronted; AVT M ANT ΓΟΡΔΙΑΝΟC AVT.  
2. Reverse: Prize crown, containing two palm fronds and inscribed ΔΑΡΖΑΛΕΙΑ; ΟΔΗΚΕΙΤΩΝ; Ε (mark of value) in exergue.

3. Name of competition ΔΑΡΖΑΛΕΙΑ inscribed on a victory wreath containing two palm fronds. (<https://www.sullacoins.com/post/the-great-god-darzalas-serapis>).

<sup>76</sup> Georgoudi 2005, 57-58.

<sup>77</sup> Gočeva 1996, 125.

<sup>78</sup> *IGB I*<sup>2</sup>, 150: “Ἀσκληπιάδης Ἀπελλά τοῦ Δημητρίου ἀρχιατρὸς / καὶ δημοφίλητος καὶ ἱερεὺς Θεοῦ Μεγάλου καὶ γυμνασιάρχος / καὶ ἀριστεὺς ...”; see also Chiekova 2008, 188, n. 46 (with the inscription translation and comments)

<sup>79</sup> *IGB I*<sup>2</sup>, 186 ter: “[ὁ δεῖνα τοῦ δεῖνος] / ἱερεὺς Θεοῦ Μεγάλου καὶ εὐποσιάρχης / (...)”.

<sup>80</sup> Chiekova 2008, 188 and n. 47 (with bibliographical comments and references).

<sup>81</sup> The term *εὐποσιάρχης* is attested with the meaning of « supervisor of sacred banquets » in the inscriptions from Odessos and Tomis, put up by cultural associations, in this respect see *IGB I*<sup>2</sup>, 51 et 167 (Odessos); *ISM II*, 82B, l. 15-16 (Tomis).

<sup>82</sup> Pick, Regling 1910, I, 2, nos.: 2370-2372, Pl. V, 3; Chiekova 2008, 188.

<sup>83</sup> Pick, Regling 1910, I, 2, 521, 525, 528.

<sup>84</sup> Gočeva 1981, 233.

<sup>85</sup> Oppermann 2002, 54.

(be with us)!” to Claudius Aquilas who, owing to his ancestors, had become an incomparable agonothetes of the great penteteric games”<sup>86</sup>; these games were identified with the games established in the honour of god Darzalas/Derzalas, attested under the name Δαρζαλεΐα on the coins dated to the period of Gordian III<sup>87</sup>. The decree in the honour of Claudius Aquila mentions these games were “penteteric”, namely were held every four years, similarly to the great Pythian contests (*Pythia*) of Delphi<sup>88</sup>. The presence of the fully loaded money bags on a type of coin discovered at Odessos, dating under Gordian III<sup>89</sup> (Fig. 8), suggests that the *Darzaleia* contests must have offered money prizes<sup>90</sup>.

## 6. Conclusions

Despite the fact that none of the Great God’s attestations exceed the limit of the Hellenistic period – which is most reliable argument in the favour of the cult’s late establishment or introduction – its dominating position in the pantheon of Odessos implies the deity had an older origin. The presence of the city ethnicity beside its image on the 2nd century BC Odessitan tetradrachms proves that *Theos Megas* was a polyad deity of Odessos, which is indicative of its undisputable age. The image of *Theos Megas* is that of a chthonian deity, which explains its similarities with Pluton, Sarapis and the Thracian Horseman.

Subsequent to the analysis of iconographic representations on coinage and epigraphic documents, it may be concluded that *Theos Megas* is a Thracian origin god, filtered by the Greeks and adopted in the Roman world. Contrary to the different scholarly views on the Thracian, Greek or syncretic origin of *Theos Megas*<sup>91</sup>, it is not excluded that the Great God had been the local chthonian, protector deity, which the Greek colonists had adopted as soon as they arrived on the western shore of the Black Sea. It is very likely that during the classical period, this deity ranked only secondary in the pantheon of Odessos. In the Hellenistic period, *Theos Megas* became increasingly popular. It was only then when the deity, indigenous in origin, became the “Great God” and adopted the iconographic features of the Greek chthonian deities. The reverse of the silver tetradrachms of Odessos dated to the second half of the 2nd century BC, render *Theos Megas* as a bearded god, standing, dressed with a long *himation* or a *chiton*, holding a cornucopia in the left hand and a libation cup in the right; “this is the standard image of chthonian deities”<sup>92</sup>. According to M. Alexandrescu Vianu, “the image of *Theos Megas* is highlighted, which in the coded iconographic language of coinage means that a cult statue was adopted as model”<sup>93</sup>. This statue is in fact depicted in front its temple on the reverse of a bronze coin struck under Gordian III. It thus results that the iconography of *Theos Megas* had already been established at the time when the silver tetradrachms had been minted, respectively the second half of the 2nd century BC<sup>94</sup>. An existing cult statue of *Theos Megas* concurrently infers that the cult of the Great God was practiced as early as the Hellenistic period.

During the Roman period, *Theos Megas* was assimilated with *Derzelas / Derzalas*, a Thracian deity originating from north-eastern Bulgaria. In fact, it seems that *Theos Megas Derzelas* attested by the



Fig. 8. Reverse: four-legged agonistic table, on which lies a wreath of two palm fronds between two money bags; beneath the table there is a two-handled vessel (the reign of Gordian III); ΟΔΗΚΕΙΤΩΝ *apud* Pick, Regling 1910, I, 2, nos.: 2368-2369, Pl. V, 4.

<sup>86</sup> IGB I<sup>2</sup> 63 bis: “... τὸν ἀπὸ προγόνων ἀσύν-/κριτον γενόμενον ἀγωνο-/θέτην · τῶν μεγάλων πεντα-/ετηρικῶν ἀγώνων καὶ ἄρξαντα / ἀγνώως (...)”.

<sup>87</sup> Chiekova 2008, 188; Dana 2011, 122.

<sup>88</sup> Ferrari 2003, 709 (s.u. *Pythic, games*).

<sup>89</sup> The reverse of this coin type displays a four-legged agonistic table, a wreath and two palm fronds between two money bags; below the table there is a two-handled vessel, see Pick, Regling 1910, 580, no. 2368-2369, Pl. V, 4.

<sup>90</sup> Dana 2011, 122-123.

<sup>91</sup> Regarding different hypotheses expressed in this matter, see Chiekova 2008, 196-199, with comments and bibliographical references.

<sup>92</sup> Pluton, Hades, Sarapis, Panocrates, Agathos Daimon and Zeus Meilichios present the same iconography, see Alexandrescu-Vianu 2005, 129; Alexandrescu-Vianu 1999-2001, 73, n. 10.

<sup>93</sup> Alexandrescu-Vianu 2005, 129.

<sup>94</sup> Alexandrescu-Vianu 2005, 129.

imperial date inscriptions is one and the same with that depicted on the silver tetradrachms of the 2nd century BC<sup>95</sup>. Also, the god is figured on Odessitan coins by late 2nd century and the 3rd century BC. The god's iconographic representation (standing, reclined or on horseback, holding the patera and cornucopia), established since the second half of the 2nd century BC, lasted until the Roman period. The image of a bearded rider holding a spear suggests a possible assimilation between the figure of the Great God and that of the Thracian Horseman or most likely, an equestrian representation of Theos Megas.

The cult of *Theos Megas Derzelas* develops at Odessos, where the god exercises fourteen times the office of city eponym. The Great God's priesthood is ensured by influential individuals. The assumption of the eponym office by Theos Megas Derzelas, as well as the existing temple of the Great God at Odessos, confirm that at least by early 3rd century BC, this god had come to the fore of the religious life in Odessos as one of its main deities.

Theos Megas, originally a Greek god of the underworld, who had partially adopted a Thracian name, was later assimilated with Sarapis, as proven by coinage. On the coins issued at Odessos in the period comprised between the rule of Septimius Severus (193-211) and that of Gordian III (238-244), Theos Megas is represented wearing a *kalathos*, which is an attribute of Sarapis. Under the rule of Gordian III, all coins depict Theos Megas with a *kalathos*. This syncretism between Theos Megas-Darzelas and Sarapis was likely facilitated by the iconographic resemblances between the two deities<sup>96</sup>. In our view, the emergence of the *kalathos* in coin iconography is not the expression of a spontaneous religious phenomenon caused by the development of local beliefs, but rather a mark of loyalty to the Roman state, even more, an express request of the Roman imperial authority to establish an official cult of Theos Megas both at Odessos and in the region located west of the Black Sea.

It is obvious that the inhabitants of Odessos had discerned in the Thracian deity Derzelas / Derzelas features and functions similar to their Great God (*Theos Megas*) in order to adopt this theonym. Last but not least, adding theonym Derzelas to the name *Theos Megas* is explained by increased influence of the Thracian population and growing importance of its religion within the Odessitan colony in Roman times<sup>97</sup>. Therefore, one may speak of continuity and concurrently, permanence of the cult of Theos Megas at Odessos starting with the Hellenistic period until the Roman period.

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<sup>95</sup> Chiekova 2008, 199-200; see A. Suceveanu according to whom *Theos Megas* and *Theos Megas Derzelas* are two distinct deities, see Suceveanu 1999, 275.

<sup>96</sup> Peter 2005, 110.

<sup>97</sup> Chiekova 2008, 200; Gočeva 1986a, 192.

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