

# IL MAR NERO

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and History - Anales de Arqueología e Historia

*Direttori:* Alexandru Avram e Ovidiu Cristea (Bucarest, Romania)

X ◦ 2019/2020



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STUDI IN RICORDO DI  
ȘERBAN PAPACOSTEA  
(1928–2018)

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## THE PONTIC KINGDOM AND THE BLACK SEA

Luigi Gallo

It is well known that with Mithridates VI of Pontus, around the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, the Black Sea region, for the first time in history, is politically unified and entirely absorbed within the kingdom of Pontus. The annexation of Chersonesus Taurica and of the Bosporan kingdom, dated around the year 110, is the result of the expedition of Diophantus of Sinope against the Scythians of Crimea (SIG<sup>3</sup> 709), and is probably immediately followed by the annexation of Olbia, deduced by IOSPE I<sup>2</sup> 35. A passage in Strabo, 11.3.18, and an excerpt of the work by Memnon of Heraclea mentioned in Photius (FGrHist 434 F 22.3) inform us of the conquest of Colchis (which, according to one thesis, occurred before the acquisition of the northern territories), while the incorporation of the western coast, chronologically uncertain, is attested by two honorific decrees, the one from Istros (SEG 47, 1125) and the other from Apollonia Pontica (IGBulg I<sup>2</sup> 392). What's behind this expansion in the Black Sea region? Some modern scholars (such as S. Y. Saprykin) have given credit to the answer provided in one of the numerous passages in Strabo's *Geography* referring to the events of Mithridates VI: the Pontic sovereign, willing to reach as far as the Adriatic Sea, actually aimed to gain strength in view of the clash against the Romans (*tauta d'en epi Romaious paraskeue*: 7.4.3)<sup>1</sup>. However, it is clear that this is an *ex eventu* explanation, which does not inspire much trust, despite the authority of the source, since there is no element pointing at the possibility that, already about the year 110, Mithridates was planning a war against the Romans (the contrast will emerge only after his maneuvers in Asia Minor). As a matter of fact, the expansion of the Eupator is connected with a political strategy already pursued by the Pontic kingdom, whose interest in the Black Sea – and this is the aspect I would like to focus on – is by no means occasional.

Let me begin with a famous passage from the fifth book of Polybius' *Histories*, in which the author mentions Mithridates II (r. 250-220, according to the commonly

<sup>1</sup> In this sense see, among others, S. J. Saprykin *The Unification of Pontos. The Bronze Coins of Mithridates VI Eupator as Evidence for Commerce in the Euxine*, in V. Gabrielsen & J. Lund (eds.), *The Black Sea in Antiquity, Regional and Interregional Economic Exchanges*, Aarhus, 2007, p. 195. For a different view see J.-L. Ferrary, *L'essor de la puissance romaine dans la zone pontique*, in A. Bresson, A. Ivantchik, J.-L. Ferrary (eds.), *Une koinè pontique. Cités grecques, sociétés indigènes et empires mondiaux sur le littoral nord de la Mer Noire (VII<sup>e</sup> s. a.C. – III<sup>e</sup> s. p.C.)*, Bordeaux, 2007, p. 321. All Strabo's references to Mithridates VI are collected by N. Biffi, *Scampoli di Mithridatika nella Geografia di Strabone*, Bari, 2010.

accepted chronology) and reports that he, who claimed to descend from one of the seven noble Persians who had murdered the usurper Smerdis, had preserved the *dynasteia* that his ancestors had received from Darius *para ton Euxeinon Ponton* (Polyb. 5.43.2). Bosworth and Wheatley, in an important article published in 1998, have reassessed the value of this tradition usually considered as nothing more than a fake genealogy<sup>2</sup>. The two authors have convincingly questioned the thesis according to which the Pontic house had originated in Kios, a humble city in the Propontis. Looking at the tradition reported by Polybius, and offering a new reading of a corrupt passage in Diodorus, related to the dominions of Mithridates *ktistes'* father (20.111.4), they have identified Mariandynia, the region nearby Heraclea Pontica, as the original nucleus of the House's dominions. To support this thesis, they have also mentioned – but this argument is a more problematic one – the evidence provided by Justin 16.4.3-4, concerning the affair of the Mithridates whom Clearchus, the tyrant of Heraclea, had to deal with in the 360s<sup>3</sup>. This is not the place to dwell on the reconstruction in detail, but suffice to say that, even it remains “a speculative construction”, as the authors admit, it allows us to better understand some aspects of the enigmatic history of the birth of the Pontic kingdom and its rapid expansion in areas located far from the Propontis. In any case – and this is what I care to stress – the tradition reported by Polybius clearly emphasizes the crucial role played by the Black Sea for the Pontic dynasty from its beginnings.

A further element I would like to stress is the precocious tendency on the part of the Pontic kings to ensure for themselves access points to the Black Sea. One first case goes back to the first half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, and is attested in a passage from Memnon's *Histories* concerning events in Heraclea, and transmitted by Photius (FGrHist 434 F 9, 3-4). According to this passage, during the negotiations between the polis and Nicomedes I of Bithynia, aimed to stipulate an anti-Seleucidic alliance, the Heracleots obtained the restitution of some coastal centers under the control of that kingdom (Kieros, Tieion and Thynias)<sup>4</sup>. However, despite their efforts, they were not able to regain Amastris, because Eumenes, who owned it, chose to give it, in exchange for nothing, to Ariobarzanes, son of Mithridates, rather than to the Heracleots who had offered him money. It is legitimate to doubt that such a cession ever took place with nothing in return, and that it should be motivated only by the foolishness of Eumenes, probably the city's governor<sup>5</sup>. What one can gather, though, is that already under the second monarch of the dynasty, Ariobarzanes (260-250s), an important coastal centre is acquired, i.e. the city of Amastris, founded through a

<sup>2</sup> A. B. Bosworth & P. V. Wheatley, *The Origins of the Pontic House*, *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 118, 1998, pp. 155-164. For the common view see, among others, F. W. Walbank, *A Historical Commentary on Polybius*, I, Oxford, 1957, p. 573.

<sup>3</sup> For the opinion (more probable according to me) that this Mithridates was the son of Ariobarzanes, the satrap of Hellespontine Phrygia, see, among others, M. Welskopf, *The So-called “Great Satraps’ Revolt”*, 366-360 BC, Stuttgart, 1990, pp. 51-52.

<sup>4</sup> About the chronology of this event see S. J. Saprykin, *Heracleia Pontica and Tauric Chersonesus before Roman Domination*, Amsterdam, 1997, p. 173.

<sup>5</sup> About this Eumenes, who, according to some scholars, could be the future dynast of Pergamon, Eumenes I, see E. V. Hansen, *The Attalids of Pergamon*, Ithaca, 1971, pp. 16-17; S. J. Saprykin, *Heracleia Pontica and Tauric Chersonesus*, p. 173.



synoecism by the wife of Dionysius of Heraclea at the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century (Strabo 12.3.10)<sup>6</sup>: this city would be bound to be part of the Pontic kingdom for a long time and, judging from the evidence of amphorae, would continue to occupy a significant role in the domain of trade just under the Pontic control<sup>7</sup>.

Memnon (through Photius) informs us of yet another important acquisition for the Pontic kingdom. In a passage building on the death of Ariobarzanes and the rise to the throne of his son Mithridates II (FGrHist 434 F 16), the historian reports that the Galatians, not having a high regard for the new king, who was still a child, began to ravage his territory, whose inhabitants, as a consequence, suffered famine. Heracleots sent *sitos* to Amisos, where it was easier for the subjects of Mithridates to obtain supplies. So, it is clear that this polis – another important trade center – was then under Pontic control, and it is more than likely that the annexation had already taken place with Ariobarzanes, since Mithridates II is still called *pais* at that time.

In the light of these two acquisitions, an event attested by Polybius (probably based on a Rhodian source) becomes clearer. I am referring to the attack against Sinope by one Mithridates (4.56): the conflict is commonly dated around the year 220, but it is doubtful whether the monarch in question should be Mithridates II or Mithridates III (most scholars, however, opt for Mithridates II)<sup>8</sup>. Not much is said in the Polybian passage, whose main interest lays in the accurate description of Sinope's topography. The historian simply reports that the Pontic polis asked Rhodes for help – an understandable choice, if one considers their intense commercial exchanges of which the amphorae are evidence, and the role played by Rhodes in the war against Byzantium some time earlier. Moreover, Polybius writes that the result was the provision of a significant financial contribution and the supply of material to use in case of siege (in particular, braided hair and animals' nerves to be used for the torsion catapults). There is no mention of the causes and the outcome of the war. That Mithridates' attack was not successful, however, can be easily deduced, since we know that the conqueror of the city will be Pharnaces later. As for the causes, it is clear that, after the annexation of Amastris and Amisus, Sinope represented a natural target for the policy of expansion on the Black Sea carried out by the Pontic kingdom.

With Pharnaces, the projection towards the Black Sea becomes more patent. This king, in 183, succeeds where Mithridates II had failed and conquers Sinope: the city, we learn from Polybius, 23.9, and Strabo, 12.3.11, is besieged and loses its long time held autonomy (even during the Persian Empire times, it was only a sort of Persian

<sup>6</sup> Strabo adds that one of the four settlements involved in the synoecism, Tieion, *tachy apeste tes koinonias*: this is confirmed by Memnon's passage, where Tieion is mentioned as a distinct city. Later, Tieion was occupied by Prusias I (Memnon, FGrHist 434 F 19), and sometimes before 183 it went probably under the control of Eumenes II (Polyb. 25.2).

<sup>7</sup> About Amastris and the evidence of its amphorae see D. B. Erçias, *Heracleia Pontica – Amastris*, in D. V. Grammenos & E. K. Petropoulos (eds.), *Ancient Greek Colonies in the Black Sea*, Thessaloniki, 2003, pp. 1419 f.

<sup>8</sup> See F. W. Walbank, *A Historical Commentary on Polybius*, p. 511; A. Primo, *Mitridate III: problemi di cronologia e identità nella dinastia pontica*, in B. Virgilio (ed.), *Studi ellenistici*, XIX, Pisa, 2006, pp. 307 f. (but his thesis according to which a Mitridates III did not exist is not convincing).

protectorate). The conquest of Sinope, where Pharnaces moves his capital, abandoning Amaseia (where the royal tomb destined to him is left unfinished)<sup>9</sup>, must have implied also the annexation of the subcolonies located on the south-eastern coast of the Black Sea: Strabo, 12.3.17, suggested as much when he states that Pharnakeia (probably today Giresun) was settled from the inhabitants of Kotyora; moreover, the toponym Kerasous attested by Arrian, *Per. Pont. Eux.* 24, with regard to Pharnakeia may lead us to think that the other subcolony of Sinope was also involved<sup>10</sup>. Apart from Heraclea (that was able to preserve its autonomy) and few poleis on the south-western coast (one of these, Tieion, was occupied by Pharnaces during the war with Eumenes II: Diod. 29.23), all the other Greek communities on the southern Black Sea coast are under Pontic dominion. It seems quite obvious that such a situation should produce relationships between the Pontic kingdom and the poleis located on the other coasts of the Black Sea.

Soon after the conquest of Sinope, Pharnaces is involved in a conflict against Eumenes II of Pergamum and other dynasts from Asia Minor<sup>11</sup>. In 179 the conflict comes to an end with a peace treaty mentioned in a fragment of Polybius' book 25 (25.1). One interesting aspect is the list of dynasts and communities apparently not involved in the conflict but included within the treaty: Asian and European dynasts (among them, the Sarmatian Gatalos), three poleis in the Black Sea, Heraclea, Mesembria and Chersonesus, and one in the Propontis, Cyzicus. If the inclusion of Cyzicus, which was allied with Eumenes (it was, in fact, the home of Apollonius, Attalus' I wife), and that of Heraclea, which was probably involved in the conflict<sup>12</sup>, can be explained, why Chersonesus and Mesembria too were included? The idea that they had been threatened by the expansionism of Pharnaces, as Will supposed<sup>13</sup>, seems unlikely, since sources do not allow us to doubt that the war was provoked only by the maneuvers of the Pontic king in Asia Minor. Rather, one can think that the two poleis placed themselves within the sphere of influence of Pharnaces, in the hope that they could obtain protection from the threats of neighboring barbarian peoples (respectively Scythians and Thracians)<sup>14</sup>. At least in the case of Chersonesus, we have the evidence of a famous epigraphic document widely debated because of a chronology problem, the treaty stipulated between this polis and king Pharnaces, dated, according to Pharnaces' calendar, to a mysterious 157th year (IOSPE I<sup>2</sup> 402).

<sup>9</sup> See R. Fleischer, *The Rock-Tombs of the Pontic Kings in Amaseia (Amasya)*, in J. M. Højte (ed.), *Mithridates VI and the Pontic Kingdom*, Aarhus, 2009, p. 111.

<sup>10</sup> About Pharnakeia see G. M. Cohen, *The Hellenistic Settlements in Europe, the Islands and Asia Minor*, Berkeley, 1995, pp. 387-388.

<sup>11</sup> Polyb. 23.9.1-4; 23.1.1-4; 24.5.1-10. About this war see É. Will, *Histoire politique du monde hellénistique (323-30 av. J.C.)*, Nancy, 1966, II, pp. 242 f.; A. Primo, *Il ruolo di Roma nella guerra pontico-pergamena del 183-179: Giustino*, XXXVIII 6, 1, in B. Virgilio (ed.), *Studi ellenistici*, XIX, Pisa, 2006, pp. 617 f.

<sup>12</sup> We know nothing about Heraclea' involvement in the war. D. B. Erçias, *Heracleia Pontica – Amastris*, p. 1413, erroneously refers the notice by Livy 42.56.6 to this war.

<sup>13</sup> É. Will, *Histoire politique*, II, p. 244.

<sup>14</sup> As regards Mesembria, see S. J. Saprykin, *Heracleia Pontica and Tauric Chersonesus*, pp. 253-254, according to whom its participation in the peace treaty of 179 can be considered also an act of anti-Macedonian policy (a thesis, however, not supported by the sources).

Alexandru Avram's recent thorough analysis exempts me from dwelling on this in detail. Avram has convincingly demonstrated that the text cannot date back to 155, as many scholars, beginning with Burstein and McGing, have maintained, because the kingdom of Pharnaces cannot be stretched so far in time<sup>15</sup>. As regards the thorny problem of the dating system employed by the Pontic monarch, truly a brain-teaser, Avram has proposed that it might be an era borrowed from the new capital of Pharnaces, Sinope, using as evidence the amphora stamps of this polis. So, a high dating is no doubt the most likely, even though – and this is the only thing I would add – the year of the treaty does not have to coincide necessarily with that of the *synthekai* attested by Polybius (Chersonesus could have approached Pharnaces some time earlier)<sup>16</sup>. Yet, the meaning of the treaty seems quite clear: there is no doubt, I believe, that the Chersonesites took the initiative (as we read in the text, they sent envoys to Pharnaces), while the Pontic king committed to remain faithful to the *philia* with that polis, to preserve its democratic constitution and, most importantly, swore to defend it from the assaults of the neighboring barbarian people against the city and its *chora* (and we know that, starting from some time, Chersonesos had to deal constantly with this problem). Although it is likely that, in the section of the text we cannot read, the Chersonesites undertook similar commitments, it is clear that it was the Greek polis to benefit from this *philia* and to put itself under the protection of its powerful partner. In conclusion, we can see the birth of that network of relationships which Mithridates VI will be able to exploit for his expansion in the Black Sea in the last decade of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. Obviously, we cannot say if Pharnaces himself had conceived such a project: however, there is no doubt that, after the failure in the war ended in 179, there were no conditions for doing so.

We can say very little about Pharnaces' successors, Mithridates IV Philopator and Mithridates V Euergetes, because we know nothing from the sources about their Black Sea policy<sup>17</sup>. However, as Saprykin has pointed out, at least for the second of them, Mithridates V, we have some elements which are useful in this respect. It is worth noting, above all, the more intense relationship with the Cimmerian Bosphoros: here, in the second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, we find, among other things, a remarkable diffusion of Amisean coins; moreover, it seems possible to note, through the epigraphic evidence, an immigration flow of people that come precisely from the southern Pontos and are perhaps involved in trading activities<sup>18</sup>.

So, we are back to Mithridates VI, from whom we started. His expansion in the Black Sea, as it is evident, is in line with a policy pursued already by his predeces-

<sup>15</sup> A. Avram, *Sur la date du traité entre Pharnace et Chersonèse Taurique*, Dialogues d'histoire ancienne, Suppl., 16, 2016, pp. 213-237. The date of 155 has been supported by S. M. Burstein, *The Aftermath of the Peace of Apamea*, American Journal of Ancient History 5, 1980, pp. 1-12, and B. C. McGing, *The Foreign Policy of Mithridates VI Eupator, King of Pontus*, Leiden, 1986, pp. 31 f. In this sense see also, among others, J.-L. Ferrary, *L'essor de la puissance romaine*, p. 319.

<sup>16</sup> S. J. Saprykin, *Heracleia Pontica and Tauric Chersonesus*, p. 253, says that the treaty between Pharnaces and Chersonesus was a consequence of including the city into the peace treaty of 179; I think it is more probable the inverse.

<sup>17</sup> On these two kings, the first of which we know very little about, see É. Will, *Histoire politique*, II, pp. 392-393.

<sup>18</sup> See S. J. Saprykin, *The Unification of Pontos*, pp. 197-198.

sors: at the same time, it undoubtedly marks a leap in quality, but this can be easily explained if we just consider the greater entrepreneurship of this king and the growing weakness of the Greek communities of the other coasts against the pressures of the nearby barbarian peoples; instead, there is no reason for supposing that there are also anti-Roman projects behind it.

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