

The German Archaeological Institute – Eurasia Department
& The Danish National Research Foundation's
Centre for Black Sea Studies

The Bosporan Kingdom

Interdisciplinary conference

Sandbjerg Manor, Denmark, 23-27 March 2009

The Bosporan Kingdom was one of the longest surviving territorial states in antiquity. Though dramatic changes occurred from the early fifth century BC to the late Roman period and despite strong pressures from outside as well as inside the kingdom, the central authority managed, with few interruptions, to retain control over the core areas around the Kimmerian Bosphoros and at times expand its sphere of influence to much of the northeastern part of the Black Sea.

The conference will cover the whole period of the kingdoms existence but the main emphasis will be on the formative period and the Roman period, as these are the least documented and where new insights into the functioning of the state are likely to be obtained.

This background paper outlines some of the topics we hope to discuss during our conference and is intended to serve as an inspiration for the participants.

The territory of the Bosporan Kingdom from the Archaic to the Hellenistic period

In the context of the Greek colonization movement, the settlement of the Northern Pontos is a relatively late phenomenon. During this process, the Greeks regularly settled along the coasts. Quite different from the Mediterranean, where the competing Phoenicians already controlled vast areas, the Greeks in the Black Sea were obviously not facing rivalling sea powers. However, there must have been some reasons to explain why the Greeks relatively late brought to an end the migration around the Pontos Euxeinos by settling the northern Pontos.

During this conference, we will deal with the specific conditions at the

Kimmerian Bosphoros, which affected the colonization process as well as the later development of the Bosporan Kingdom. These conditions resulted from the geographical situation of the Bosphoros, which on one hand was the passage between the Black Sea and the Sea of Asov, and on the other hand the bridgehead for the land connection between the continents. From early on, the Greek cities located along these vital routes between the Crimean and the Caucasus were bound in a federation of city-states, which afterwards expanded to the tribes along the Kuban river and beyond.

The formation of the Bosporan Kingdom: Continuity and discontinuity

The determining event during the early time of Greek presence in the northern Pontos was doubtless the union of the formerly independent Greek cities. It resulted in a territorial empire under the leadership of Pantikapaion in the early fifth century BC. In order to find the reasons for this event and the causes, which led to the unprecedented economical and political rise of this empire, we should analyse the conditions existing before and after the foundation of the Bosporan Kingdom. Continuities as well as discontinuities may enable us to understand more precisely the process of transformation from free cities to a centrally organised territorial state. In this context, it is important to concentrate on the conditions under which the Greeks settled, lived, worked and conducted their trade. We would like to get a critical overview in which archaeology, numismatics, epigraphy and new theories are taken into account, but also make use of the methodology produced by the natural sciences in recent times and add it into interdisciplinary approaches in order to have fresh insights.

Ethnicity in the territory before and after the formation of the Bosporan Kingdom

The question concerning the population that the Greeks met during their colonization of the Bosphoros and how this population developed in the course of time has frequently been posed. Until today, we lack exact knowledge about its ethnic structure. Therefore, one should ask if a comparative view can also detect the changes in population before and after the foundation of the Bosporan Kingdom. Moreover, the structure of the Greek settlers itself has to be analysed further. In the course of the

expansion of the Bosporan Kingdom after its consolidation, tribes at the foot of the Caucasus and beyond were integrated into the state and the Bosporan kings adopted the title of rulers over these people. One can ask if this phenomenon had any retroaction on the Greek cities and if the expansion influenced the annexed territories.

Centre and Periphery

Another focus of interest lies on the hierarchy from cities to small settlements and their territories. This complex of questions is especially susceptible to structural changes, since we can detect the mutation from formerly free political units, the Greek cities and settlements, to a state with one centre of power, the Bosporan Kingdom. This is why a discussion of the available information concerning the settlement-pattern and the settlement-structure of the Greeks as well as their exploration of the hinterland in this early period seems so fruitful. Later on, an enormous increase of agricultural productivity and a trade boom characterized the rise of the Bosporan Kingdom and its rulers. Are there concrete criteria for structural movements from centres and periphery, which can be connected to the formation of the Bosporan Kingdom? This question can be extended to the annexed territories.

The Bosporan Kingdom in the Roman Period

The final defeat of Mithridates VI in the Third Mithridatic War made Rome the undisputed power in the Black Sea region. The Bosporan Kingdom was however, unlike the western and southern parts of the Black Sea, never incorporated into the provincial system, but continued to exist as a client kingdom outside the borders of the Roman Empire. Because of the richness and diversity of the sources in the form of epigraphical, archaeological, numismatic, and literary evidence, the area offers a unique possibility for studying how the Roman Empire extended its political and cultural influence across its borders. While other border states have been studied intensely, relatively little attention has so far been paid to the Bosporan Kingdom as a neighbour to the Roman Empire. A better understanding of this relationship can offer a deeper insight into how people outside the Roman Empire reacted to its presence economically, culturally, and religiously – not just in the Black Sea area but at large. The conference intends to explore the similarities and differences in this relation

compared to other regions peripheral to the Roman Empire and the level of direct involvement and presence by the Romans in the Bosporan Kingdom. Central to this discussion is also the question of how the Bosporan kings managed to maintain the delicate balance between sovereignty over the population in their domains on the one hand and subordination to the Roman emperor on the other.

Ethnicity in the Bosporan Kingdom

The Bosporan Kingdom was throughout its history a multiethnic and multicultural society. This seems to be true for all social strata. Much scholarship still preserves a very Hellenocentric perspective on this cultural meeting and tends to view the Greek cities on the Bosporos as isles in a sea of mostly hostile Barbarians. The question is whether this contradiction actually existed, or whether different ethnic groups co-existed in mutual interdependence, or even whether the distinction between different ethnic groups is at all a viable path for understanding how the Bosporan Kingdom functioned.

Questions we hope to explore during the conference are among others, how ethnicity was expressed in the archaeological material and the onomastic evidence, what was the outcome of interaction between different ethnic groups, to what degree can we speak of assimilation or acculturation, was there an "us and them" within the Bosporan Kingdom and between people inside and outside the kingdom, what was the role of the Bosporan army as a uniting factor, and how was social cohesion maintained: by brute force or by mutual benefits.

Trade

The Bosporan Kingdom was situated at a key point on the north-south trade route from the north of the Maiotis to the Black Sea and further to the Mediterranean and the Danube region. Throughout the period, Tanais was maintained as a collecting point for trade to the north. What was the nature of this trade and to what extent did the Bosporan Kingdom rely on trade as a source of income. Several different groups of imported objects from the Roman Empire have been studied, but there are many gaps in our knowledge, and the overall trade patterns in the Roman period have received relatively little attention.

The coinage of the Bosporan Kingdom

One of the themes that we intend the conference to focus on will be the monetary policies of the Bosporan kings.

The coinage and coin circulation in the Bosporan Kingdom after the beginning of our era show a number of unique traits compared with other regions both within the Roman Empire and beyond. The coin system was primarily based on gold coins, whereas the Roman coin system was based on both silver and gold. Its circulation was also almost exclusively restricted to the Bosporan territory. It is a topic for debate why the Bosporan kings decided to not to adopt the Roman currency, the standard international trade currency of the day, but kept their own currency.

The study of the chronology of the coinage and the coin circulation in the Bosporan Kingdom has been an object of attention of Russian and a few western scientists for a long time. The study of the coinage has been used to gain an insight into the Bosporan economy and used e.g. as supporting evidence to prove when a particular campaign against a nearby tribe may have taken place and also to raise the question of how closely the Bosporan coinage followed the devaluations of the Roman currency; and in relation to this, how closely the kingdoms currency was monitored by Roman officials of the adjacent provincial Roman mints. The level of control, which the Bosporan ruler held over the state's financial instruments is also debatable.

The imagery of the coinage displays some interesting features such as the year of issue on the gold coins, which is one of the cornerstones of the Bosporan chronology. The royal issuer of the coins is at first only represented by his monogram, whereas the Roman emperor's portrait is represented on the coins from the beginning. The Bosporan ruler's portrait and titles quickly becomes a standard feature of the coins. It is a point of discussion whether the Sarmatian and Thracian influences seen in other parts of Bosporan culture from the second century AD is also evidenced in the coinage, such as the monograms and the changed iconography of the ruler portrait. In recent years there has been an absence of discussion of the propaganda value of the Bosporan issues and the way the coins were intended to be perceived by the receiver.

The final period of the Bosporan Kingdom

The Late Antique period is characterized by the destruction caused by the raids of migrating tribes, but in between there were periods of stability. It is still debateable how widespread the destruction was and to what extent the territory was affected.

Establishing a chronology of events in the period and an evaluation of the changes occurring is still needed. One of the notable effects is a weakening of the central authority. What influence did that have on society towards the end of the Bosporan Kingdom.