

# The Administrative Organisation of the Pontic Kingdom

*Jakob Munk Højte*

In his account of the Kappadokian Kingdom in central Anatolia, Strabon (12.1) gives a detailed description of the administrative framework and its evolution from the Persian to the Roman period, but when he turns to Pontic Kappadokia, which constituted the core of the Kingdom of Mithridates VI, such a description lacks completely for the Hellenistic period. Since Strabon's *patria* was Amaseia in Pontos, his interests are often of a more private nature, such as praise of his home town and the merits of prominent persons in his family. When he does discuss administrative matters it exclusively concerns the organisation of the province by Pompeius and successive Roman interventions and adjustments.<sup>1</sup> Only in his description of Komana Pontike does he elaborate on the status of the temple state and its high priest under the kings. Other literary sources give only scattered and fragmented information, and we lack therefore a comprehensive account of the administrative structure of Pontos under the Mithridatids. In order to get an idea about how the kingdom was organised, it is necessary to look at a variety of sources including written accounts, inscriptions, topographical information, survey data and numismatic evidence.

## *Urbanisation and the role of cities*

The first thing worth consideration is the importance of cities in the Pontic Kingdom and whether they functioned as administrative centres.

In Pompeius' reorganisation of the province Bithynia and Pontos, cities came to play a key role in the administrative system. Pompeius created a continuum of city state territories throughout the province. On the coast he could build on already existing *poleis*, the old Greek colonies, but in the interior he founded a number of cities: Pompeiopolis, Neapolis, Magnopolis, Zela, Megalopolis, Nikopolis, and Diospolis. It has been assumed that his reason for doing so was that no cities existed previously. To Reinach for example: "Städtische Centren waren in Pontos nur erst spärlich vorhanden".<sup>2</sup> In an administrative sense this may be true, but is it true in a demographic sense? Was urbanization in the interior at a very low level under the Mithridatids? If we look at Pompeius' foundations, most were in fact located in already populated places. Magnopolis was at the site of Eupatoria, a foundation of Mithridates,



Fig. 1a-d. Zeus/eagle type bronze coins issued at: a-b) Gazioura, c-d) Pimolisa (photos: J.M. Højte).

which he later himself destroyed because it had sided with the Romans. Zela already existed as a temple state, and Strabon's remark (12.3.37) that in earlier times the kings governed Zela, not as a polis, but as a sacred precinct must simply mean that it lacked the political institutions of a Greek city. Diospolis was at the site of Kabeira, where Mithridates had built a palace, which in all likelihood was an urban centre as well. At any rate, the nearby temple state of Ameria had a large population (Strab. 12.3.31). Although it is at present impossible to tell exactly how developed these three cities were under the kings it would seem that the primary change was that they were given the institutions and constitutions of Greek *poleis*. Only Pompeiopolis, Megalopolis and Nikopolis, all on the periphery of Pontos, seem not to have been placed in already existing settlements. We must therefore consider whether there could be other explanations than the previous lack of such, as to why Pompeius

founded cities in Pontos.<sup>3</sup> It could be the personal ambition of the successful commander to become *ktistes* of cities in newly conquered territory. It could also be a deliberate attempt at breaking up existing administrative structures. As we shall see, this was certainly the case with the destruction of the many strongholds built by the Mithridatids in Pontos.

In her recent book "Wealth, Aristocracy and Royal Propaganda", Erciyas makes a fine summary of the surveys carried out in Pontos to date. Although there are serious methodological problems in using and comparing the data of these surveys carried out for different purposes, with different methods, and at different levels of intensity, they overall seem to show a rather consistent picture of the settlement pattern.<sup>4</sup> During the iron age, settlement was dispersed at many sites throughout the territory, while for the Hellenistic period, material has turned up at far fewer sites. Nearly half the iron age sites were abandoned by the Hellenistic period and only few new sites were established. Since the surveys give little information about site sizes, it is impossible to determine whether this indicates a decline in the population or whether it signifies contraction of the population into larger urban centres. Given the size of the armies that Mithridates VI was able to raise throughout the conflict with Rome we would tend to think the latter: that the population in the interior of Pontos primarily lived in cities.<sup>5</sup> This fact is further emphasised, if we consider the survey data for the Roman period. In the territories of Amaseia and Amisos and not least in the territory of Sinope a notable increase in the number of sites can be registered with Roman remains, but no previous Hellenistic material. The same pattern can be observed in the interior of Paphlagonia as shown by the Paphlagonia Survey Project.<sup>6</sup> It would thus seem that the settlement pattern of the Roman period was more dispersed than during the Hellenistic period. The notion that the population in the interior in the Hellenistic period lived in scattered villages as suggested by some literary sources is not supported by the currently available survey data.<sup>7</sup>

What was the attitude of the Pontic kings towards the cities and was urbanisation encouraged? A common trait of practically all Hellenistic kings was their desire to found cities in their own or a family member's name and this seems to some extent also to be the case also for the Mithridatid kings although relatively little information about city foundations is preserved. Pharnakeia must surely have been a foundation by Pharnakes I, located on the coast at Giresun, probably at the site of an already existing Greek city Kerasous. Another candidate is Laodikeia, which is probably to be located near Lake Stiphane. It is unknown which Laodike the city refers to, as all kings from Mithridates II to the VI, except Pharnakes I, was married to a Laodike. None of these two cities were turned into *poleis* in the reorganisation of Pompeius. One may wonder whether this was a deliberate choice. The only certain known foundation in Pontos under Mithridates VI was Eupatoria, which is situated just south of the confluence of the rivers Lykos and Iris in a highly strategic point at the crossing of the road going east-west

through Pontos and the route going to the coast through the narrow valley cut by the Iris river. Today the site is clearly visible in the landscape but it has never been excavated – by archaeologists at any rate – and nothing is known about the city except that it was turned into a *polis* by Pompeius and renamed Magnopolis.

Even though the evidence shows that cities existed in the interior and that the kings founded cities, there is no literary or epigraphic evidence to support the notion that cities were self-governed entities as was often the case in other Hellenistic kingdoms. We never hear of assemblies or councils and there are no known city magistrates. Of course this is an argument *ex silentio* and granted the body of epigraphic evidence, which typically would reveal such institutions, is restricted.

#### *The “municipal” coinage under Mithridates VI*

The only existing evidence that could suggest that some cities possessed a degree of autonomy are the so-called “municipal” bronze coins minted in the name of different localities during the reign of Mithridates VI. According to the old classification of Imhoof-Blumer,<sup>8</sup> the coins were minted throughout the whole reign of Mithridates, but recently F. de Calatay has suggested that all the coins rather should belong to the period before the end of the First Mithridatic War.<sup>9</sup>

It has previously been thought that the coinage was part of a deliberate policy of Hellenization by Mithridates VI which included an attempt to promote Greek, *polis*-like structures in Pontos – particularly in the interior. The permission to allow cities to mint coins should foster local pride.<sup>10</sup> However, there was beyond question a central authority with an organised political programme behind the coinage, as the coin types are the same for all the different mints (Fig. 1a-d).<sup>11</sup> This would seem to leave little room for autonomy. Furthermore the volume of the output of the individual mints differs immensely. If indeed they are different mints and not the product of a single or a few mints. This has to my knowledge never been established. A simple test would be to check whether the same obverse dies were ever used with reverse dies of different localities.<sup>12</sup>

Amisos by far struck the most coins. Perhaps as much as 60 or 70% of the total. Sinope likewise had a large output but the rest of the localities account for insignificant proportions. Clearly the coinage was not intended to serve the need for small denominations in the economy of individual *poleis*.<sup>13</sup>

It may be worth considering whether the coinage rather reflects existing administrative units within the kingdom with the issuing place being the administrative centre of each unit (Fig. 2). There were ten issuing places in Pontos as defined in the geographical sense by the Halys River: Amaseia, Amisos, Chabakta, Gazioura, Kabeira, Komana, Laodikeia, Pharnakeia, Pimolisa and Taulara and three further outside Pontos. Those are Sinope, the primary



Fig. 2. Map of Pontus showing issuing localities of "municipal" coinage.

royal residence, Amastris, an early possession of the kings, and probably Dia west of Herakleia.<sup>14</sup>

All the places striking coins, perhaps with the exception of Komana, are characterized by having a strongly fortified citadel. Two locations attract particular attention: Chabakta and Taulara. Chabakta can be identified with a fortress on a steep mountain situated at Kaleköy 10 km to the south west of Ünye, the ancient Greek city on the coast, Oinoe. There is nothing to suggest that there was ever a town in this place.<sup>15</sup> Similarly Taulara, if identified correctly by Olshausen and Biller as a fortress situated at Horoztepe to the southeast of Tokat, does not seem to have been connected with urban structures.<sup>16</sup> Both localities disappear completely from the sources after the fall of Mithridates. If the purpose of the coinage was to promote cities, the obvious choices for mints would in these two instances have been Oinoe and Dazimon instead. Furthermore, why did cities such as Side, Kotyora, Zela, Kromna and Phazemon not strike coins. A reasonable explanation could be that they were not centres for the royal administration.

#### *Strabon on Kappadokia*

Returning to Strabon and what he says concerning the administrative division of Kappadokia. Until Strabon's time, the Kappadokian Kingdom was divided into ten prefectures (*strategiai*) of equal size headed by a *strategos*. At some point, probably in the first century BC a part of Kilikia was added to form

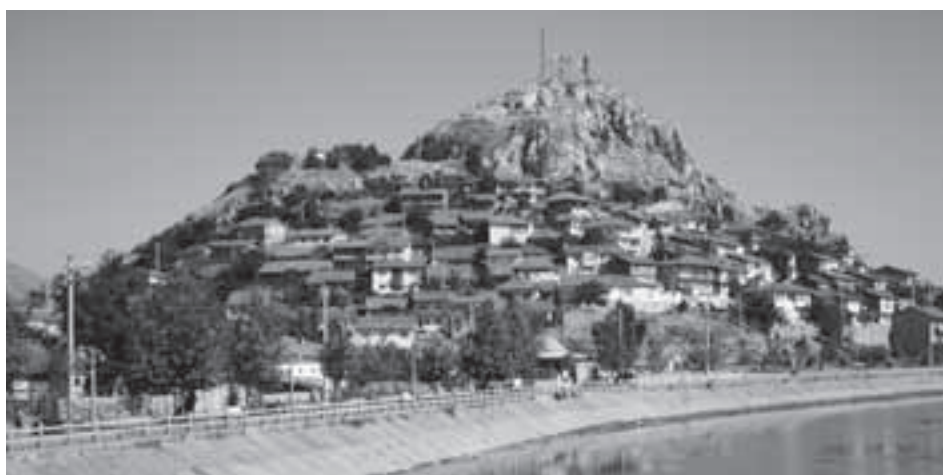


an eleventh prefecture.<sup>17</sup> On many occasions Strabon stresses the similarities between Pontos and Kappadokia, which, although from early on divided into two satrapies under Achaemenid rule, shared a common cultural and religious background heavily influenced by Persia. This similarity is underlined by several cross references between the two regions in his description. It is likely therefore, that both kingdoms should have had comparable administrative subdivisions. The division of territory into *strategiai* is also known from other Hellenistic kingdoms: the Seleukid, the Attalid, Ptolemaic Egypt, the minor kingdoms in Asia Minor as well as in the Parthian Empire.<sup>18</sup> Bengtson in his thorough study of *strategiai* in the Hellenistic period concludes somewhat pessimistically, that it is highly probable that Pontos was divided into *strategiai* but that no evidence proves it.<sup>19</sup> I suggest that the “municipal” coinage reflects the division of Pontos into *strategiai* and that the places of issue correspond to the seat of the *strategos*, who used the coinage primarily to pay for local troops.

#### *Military and administrative personnel*

Another way of investigating the administrative organisation of the kingdom is to examine the administrative posts and offices. The king was supreme in all military, judicial and religious matters but as most Hellenistic kings, Mithridates VI had a circle of friends (*filoi*) filling the highest posts in the administration. The sons of Mithridates also took part in running the empire and served both as generals and as satraps in the conquered territories Kolchis and in Bosporos. Apart from the sons we know next to nothing about the role of the other relatives of Mithridates VI. In a rare instance we hear that a military officer, Phoinix, was related to Mithridates VI, but the relation is not specified (App. *Mith.* 79).

For his article “Hellenisierungsprozess am Pontischen Königshof”, Olshausen also compiled a list of nearly all the known persons at the Pontic court, officials, and persons holding military commands.<sup>20</sup> There are two points concerning the list worth noting. First of all, nearly all the evidence pertains to the reign of Mithridates VI. Only four or perhaps five persons out of some 80 on the list served earlier kings. This is well in accordance with other testimony on the Pontic Kingdom. Since we largely lack local sources from the Hellenistic period, such as inscriptions, we only hear about Pontic affairs when events influenced the outside – and more specifically the Greek and Roman world. This leads on to the second point namely that the sources for the list are surprisingly limited and concentrate almost exclusively on the generals and the other military officers in the conflict with Rome. The remaining part consists of persons closely associated with the king: philosophers, a court musician, his perfumer and his personal physicians. Administrative and religious offices appear to be practically absent. Evidently eunuchs played an important role at the court and in the administration as they had



*Fig. 3a-c. Pontic fortresses at: a) Pimolisa, b) Gazioura, c) Chabakta (photos: J.M. Højte).*

in the Persian Empire: the best known is Bacchos, who was sent to kill the women in the palace after Mithridates had fled to Armenia in 70 BC. He was probably a personal attendant of the king, but others served as army officers and commanders of garrisons. Sometimes they are not mentioned by name, simply that they were eunuchs. Those mentioned by name had Greek names like Kleocharēs, Menophilos, Ptolemaios, and Tryphon, which may not have corresponded to their ethnic origin. The phenomenon could have been far more common than the list here suggests as the sources probably left out this particular information in a number of instances.

It is worth to consider more closely the two most commonly occurring titles *strategos* and *phourarchos*. Both could signify a military as well as an administrative function, and at times it may be difficult to distinguish between the two. A *strategos* could be a general and a prefect. Bengtson discounted all the references to *strategoī* in the sources as evidence for *strategiai* in Pontos, on the grounds that all except one belonged in a military context. But this should not surprise us, since practically all our sources describe the period of the wars with Rome. The only *strategos* not mentioned in a specifically military context is Alkimos honoured in a decree found in Abonouteichos in coastal Paphlagonia.<sup>21</sup> This inscription also has the rare feature of a dating to the year 161 according either to the Seleukid or the Bithyno-Pontic era and in addition mentions Mithridates V. Here Bengtson argues that Alkimos could be *strategos* of a Greek *polis*, and that the inscription therefore cannot be used as evidence for the administration of the kingdom. I think the distinction between the military and administrative functions of *strategoī* – and *phourarchoi* for that matter – may not always be relevant when discussing the Pontic Kingdom as the two would often have overlapped. This was a result of the way the territory was controlled.

### *Bosporos*

The region which may yield the best clues about the organisation of the territory of the Pontic Kingdom is the Bosporos. This region was incorporated into the kingdom after the campaigns of Diophantos before 110 BC and it is so far the most thoroughly investigated part of the kingdom. Here it has been noted that major changes occurred in the organisation of the landscape in the early first century BC after the area had been incorporated into the Pontic Kingdom.<sup>22</sup> Previously the territory on both sides of the Straits had been divided among the Greek *poleis* and subdivided into land plots of a size that indicates ownership by individual families. This is particularly discernable on the Taman Peninsula, which was nearly completely divided into land plot with individual farmhouses. In the first century BC, *polis* territories were greatly diminished and the number of farms declined. Instead a new type of land tenure was introduced centred around fortresses.<sup>23</sup> These were usually built on easily defensible hilltops and had thick walls with towers, ditches



and ramparts. Apart from serving as defence against raids from local tribes they also controlled the agrarian territory and functioned as gathering points for agricultural produce. We have every reason to believe that this new type of land tenure was a direct derivative of the organisation of Pontos.

### *Pontos*

When we turn to Pontos we find the same extensive network of fortresses throughout the country (Fig. 3a-c). The best impression of the network is offered by the map prepared by Olshausen and Biller.<sup>24</sup> The key importance of the fortresses for the royal administration is shown by the fact that after Mithridates had conquered Lesser Armenia he immediately began constructing strongholds (*phouriai*) – no less than 75 according to Strabon (12.3.28).

The fortifications are often difficult to date, but most have one feature in common, namely one or more tunnels cut deep into the rock in order to reach a secure water supply (Fig. 4a-c).<sup>25</sup> There exists variations on the theme, but the similarity in construction suggests that they are contemporaneous and were part of a common design. These *phouriai* in all likelihood constituted the core of the administrative system of the Pontic Kingdom serving both military and economic functions. In this respect the situation in Pontos probably reflected that in the Kappadokian Kingdom, where some fortresses were possessed by the king while others were given to his *filoi* (Strab. 12.2.9).

The fortresses had no place in the reorganisation of Pompeius, which was centred on self-governing *poleis*, and in fact he had many of them destroyed (Strab. 12.3.38), supposedly in order that they should not become hideouts for robbers. However they also posed a threat to the new regime as shown by the incident of Arsakes, the son of Pharnakes II, who attempted to regain power in Pontos. He sought refuge in the fortress Sagylion but was driven out because the water reservoirs had been filled with rocks. Their redundancy to the Roman administration may account for the poor state of preservation of the Hellenistic fortifications. In many places only late Roman and Byzantine wall are to be seen today.

### *Conclusion*

Independent self-governing *poleis* seem to have played an insignificant role in the administrative structure of the Pontic Kingdom. The only places that enjoyed some form of independence were the temple states headed by a priest who controlled the revenue of the sacred lands and the temple servants. However, this does not mean, as it has often been put forward, that Pontos, and in particular the interior of Pontos, was devoid of cities. As suggested by the survey data available, the Hellenistic period is characterized by a contraction of the population into fewer and probably larger sites compared to the previous and the later Roman period.



Fig. 4a-c. Stepped tunnels at: a) Tokat/Dazimon, b) Gazioura, c) Chabakta (photos: J.M. Højte).



The sources offer little information about the administrative sub-divisions of Pontos, but it is reasonable to assume that the Pontic Kingdom like the Kappadokian Kingdom was divided into *strategiai*. Possibly the “municipal” coinage under Mithridates VI reflect these and the localities mentioned on the coins could be the administrative centre of the prefecture.

### Notes

- 1 For Strabon’s approach in his account of Pontos, see Lindsay 2005, 180-199.
- 2 Reinach 1895, 252. Similarly Magie 1950, 180 and Jones 1971, 156.
- 3 For the question of the nature and purpose of the Pompeian foundations, see Fletcher 1939, 17-29; Dreizehnter 1975, 213-245.
- 4 For discussion of the methodological problems and a full bibliography of surveys, see Erciyas 2006, 52-61. One further problem with the survey data is that it often does not distinguish between the Classical and the Hellenistic periods.
- 5 Erciyas 2006, 61.
- 6 Matthews, Pollard & Ramage 1998, 195-216.
- 7 In particular App. *Mith.* 65 stating that Murena captured 400 villages belonging to Mithridates (contested by Glew 2000, 155-162) and the name Chiliokômon for the district northwest of Amaseia (Strab. 12.3.39).
- 8 Imhoof-Blumer 1912, 169-192.
- 9 Callataj 2005, 119-136.
- 10 Saprykin 2007; Erciyas 2006, 116. Contrary Callataj is of the opinion that the coins were struck for the purpose of paying troops.
- 11 For a table of types and presently known mints and volume of output, see Callataj 2005, 132.
- 12 Imhoof-Blumer (1912, 191) notes that the same die-cutter was responsible for the coins of both Amastris and coins with the legend ΔΙΑΣ using this as evidence for placing the mint in the Bithynian town Dia on account of its geographical proximity to Amastris.
- 13 Callataj 2003, 226 and his contribution in the present volume.
- 14 Imhoof-Blumer 1912, 191-192.
- 15 Olshausen & Biller 1984, 120 with references.
- 16 Olshausen & Biller 1984, 54-60.
- 17 Panichi 2005, 200-215.
- 18 Bengtson 1944.
- 19 Bengtson 1944, 265.
- 20 Olshausen 1974, 153-170. For an in depth discussion of the associates of Mithridates VI, see Portanova 1988.
- 21 Reinach 1905, 113-119.
- 22 Saprykin 2004, 207-210.
- 23 See Gavrilov in this volume.
- 24 Olshausen & Biller 1984.
- 25 The catalogue of Gall (1967, 504-527) included approximately 40 tunnels in Pontos and Paphlagonia. Many more were added by Olshausen and Biller (1984).

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