

THE PONTIC IDENTITY: HELLENISM, CIVIC LIFE AND MITHRIDATES' PROPAGANDA

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The history of Pontus is a peculiar example of the co-existence of the Hellenic civilization with a barbarian world. This kingdom, located in both Paphlagonia and Pontic Cappadocia, which were divided by the river Halis, had been for centuries a remote and bad known land. Near this territory was the gate of the reign of Hades and the land of the amazons. The mythic kingdom of Colchis reached indeed to the Halis, so allowing to the Mithridatid kings to appear as heirs of Eetes' throne. Heracles, a civilizer hero, would have visited those shores as in his travel to the amazon's kingdom, as a fellow of Jason and the Argonauts. But this mythic past, that justified partially the Greeks colonies of that region, did not hide that the Cappadocians as well as the Paphlagonians would have been considered as rough peoples, badly integrated in the Hellenic culture. As in the case of the Carians, the inhabitants of the Mithridatic dominions were an example of those barbarians who had learned Greek with great difficulty, and who could not hide their rustic roots.

It is true, as Reinach affirmed, that those scarce colonies (Sinope, Amisos, Amastris, Trapezus) were very limited to spread the Greek culture. Those cities were bad inserted into the great Achaemenid Empire, because, as Briant said, this region of the Anatolian North East was ever an unreedemed territory, which never accepted a whole submission to the Great King's power. That may be the reason why Reinach said that Sinope and Amisos received the victories of Alexander with a "moderate enthusiasm" (an idea that we can not confirm). When the Macedonian conqueror died, all this coastal region of the Euxinus, as far as Trapezus, was assigned to Eumenes, who, however, did not exercise any real power over this land, and his dominion was only limited to the core of inland Cappadocia.

Taking firstly profit of the struggle between the Diadochs, and afterwards of the rivalry between Seleucids and Lagids, Mithridates I the Founder and his successors got a territory in inland Paphlagonia. These rulers soon reached the coast, after the conquest of Amastris, and, from there, they showed a special interest on the coastal region which was extended on both shores of the Halis. Since the second half of the 3rd. century, Amisos, Sinope, and the other Greek coastal settlements of this region, were taken by the Mithridatids, who were descendants of the former Persian satraps of Mysia. Therefore, the Kingdom of Pontus was a territory conquered to the dynasts of Cappadocia and Paphlagonia as well as to the Greek cities of this area.

After having founded a little dynasty in Cius, the ancestors of the Pontic kings had been engaged in the wars of the Diadochs, in order to consolidate their own position. In this sense, we can regard the presence of the later Mithridates I of Pontus in the court of Antigonos, and the friendship of this prince with the young Demetrios Poliorcetes. In the same way, the marriages between the Seleucids and the royal Pontic House would have represented an aim of the Mithridatids to strenghten their power, and also to be recognized by the Hellenic community. We could say the same thing about the evergetic attitude of the Pontic kings towards several Greek cities, as we shall see below.

The relationship between Pontus and the Greek world was not an exception [in respect to] other kingdoms of Asia Minor: as the Bithynian dynasty as the Cappadocian one, strove to get marriages with both the Antigonids and the Seleucids, respectively. We have also proofs of the munificence of some of those kings towards the Greek cities, and in particular with Athens. But this philhellenism was not only a cultural measure, but it also may have had a concrete purpose in the politics and the economy of the different Kingdoms. So, the approach to the Greek world of those barbarian kings would have not come nor from a sort of fashion, nor from

a feeling among the elites of those kingdoms, who regarded the Greek culture as better. In our opinion, the philhellenism of those rulers was due, in a great part, to their need to find supports that would contribute to consolidate their rule in periods of dynastic conflicts and territorial rivalry among the different kingdoms. Therefore, this progression of the Hellenic culture would not represent an opposition between two civilizations, but rather an aspect of the struggle of different groups in those kingdoms to obtain the power or to keep it. So, it would perhaps be not wholly appropriate to speak about a rivalry between an autochthonous "traditional" nobility, against a Greek "progressist" aristocracy. An example of this, very significant in our opinion, may have been in the case of Cappadocia. In the second century B.C. there were in this kingdom two princes, who were contending for the throne: for one side, Orophernes, who, as Polybius says, abandoned the ancestral traditions and introduced in his kingdom the Ionian libertinism. On the other side, the future Ariarathes V, who was a half-brother of Orophernes, appears described by Diodorus Siculus as a champion of the Greek culture, educated in the *paideia*. In this same sense, Gordios, the leader of the faction among the Cappadocian nobility which was dissident towards the Ariarathids, looked for the support of a philhellenic ruler as Mithridates Eupator. So, we face to a struggle for the power, not to a dispute among philhellenes and philobarbarians.

In Pontus, this philhellenism would have faced, to some extent, with a Persian nobility, which is mentioned by Appian, when he says that Mithridates I Ctistes founded his kingdom with other six fellows, a tale clearly related with the history of Darius and the murder of Gaumata. We can suppose that this nobility would have enjoyed special privileges, probably regarding great rural states, controlled from little fortresses similar to the towers described by our sources in Achaemenid and Hellenistic Asia Minor. This nobility would have resisted to the loss of their special role when the Greek people were increasing their influence in the royal court. Would have appeared several troubles, that would not have only taken place in the childhood and first regnal years of Mithridates Eupator. These troubles would have gone back to the time of Pharnaces I, who could have come to the throne after the death (or the loss of dynastic rights) of another crown prince, who perhaps was called Mithridates. This may explain, among other matters, the interest of Antiochos III and his uncle Achaïos, the both married with Pontic princesses, to name Mithridates to their eldest sons, a name wholly strange to the Seleucid tradition.

As we have seen, there was also in Cappadocia a rivalry between the nobility and the rulers. Several Cappadocian kings were murdered, and the queen Laodice put to death several of her sons, in order to keep the power after the death of her husband Ariarathes V. But there were important differences between Cappadocia and Pontus. In the Ariarathid Kingdom, the nobility had the power to recognize the dynastic rights of the crown prince, and, indeed, the power to establish treaties with foreign states together with the king. If there were in Pontus a similar situation, the kings' power ended with it. (Our only evidence may be a passage from Florus, in which is told that Sulla signed the treaty of Dardanos *cum Ponticis*. But it is a dark and isolated passage). The rivalry in the circle of *philoï* of the young king Eupator, was perhaps one of the last episodes in which this ancestral nobles tried to keep their privileges face to the royal power. In fact, Mithridates appears mostly surrounded by Greek people, which may have been the main support of the king's government. As we noted, it is remarkable that the title "Second after the king" was given in Pontus to a Greek man (Dorilaos, Strabos' relative), who, furthermore, was not a member of the royal house, once more in a different way than in the Cappadocian kingdom.

Perhaps, as we told, this approach to the Hellenic community by the kings of Pontus would be motivated by their interest to check the Iranian nobility, which would have lost a part of his influence. But that support to the Greeks of Pontus was related also with the support to

the cities: the interest of Mithridates to base his reign on an urban structure may have been another aspect in the strengthening of the royal house with Greek support, diminishing the influence of the ancestral nobility.

Regarding the Pontic foreign policy, we have already told about the relations of Pontus with the Seleucids and with Athens. We should also not forget the expansion of the Pontic interests towards other areas of the Black Sea: in Eupator's times it was established a great union of almost all the Greeks of this sea. But we could research about other relations between the Pontic kingdom and the Hellenic World. We consider that it has been not yet spoken enough about Rhodes, whose relation with Pontus is only seen through scattered clues. Polybius speaks about Rhodes' efforts to help Sinope, when this city was besieged by Mithridates III, and, however, this same king helped Rhodes after an earthquake. In the reign of Pharnaces I, we find also a situation that seems contradictory, when our sources regard the Rhodian protests to the Roman Senate in 183/2 b.c. for the killing of many inhabitants of Sinope, that had just been conquered by the Pontic king. The easiest interpretation of this complaint is that Rhodes was worried for the fall of an important commercial city, which, furthermore, controlled little ports of cabotage towards the Eastern shore of the Euxinus, as Armene, Cotyora, Cerasus and Trapezus. But we should note several interesting aspects of this account: in the first place, Rome turned a deaf ear to this protest against Pharnaces, because the Republic did not demand either the retirement of the Pontic ruler from Sinope, nor any sort of fine for the dead Sinopeans. In the treaty that ended the war of Pharnaces against Pergamum and its allies, Rome, as grant of the peace, confirmed the *statu quo* of the Pontic coastal territories (including Sinope), whereas the other territories conquered during this conflict had to be returned.

For her own part, Rhodes seemed to have soon forgotten the conquest of Sinope, and showed an interest for a productive co-operation with the powerful kingdom of Pharnaces. Perhaps the Rhodians had no other option than to admit the evidence of the Pontic power, granted by Rome, and to obtain benefits in spite of a vain struggle. We have several evidences that reflect these good relations: in the first place, the Rhodians claimed against the naval blockade of Hellespontus by Eumenes II of Pergamum during the war against Pharnaces. This obstacle damaged the interests of the powerful island. Furthermore, it is significant that Rhodes did not fight in this same war together with Pergamum against the king of Pontus, who, at first sight, would be a common enemy. On the contrary, as we have seen, the Attalid kingdom tried to act against the commercial interests of Rhodes. But we have to highlight also that a Rhodian was the sponsor of an inscription in Delos honouring Laodice, sister of Pharnaces and Mithridates Philopator. These good relations may have continued afterwards, because there was in Rhodes a statue of Mithridates Eupator, who took part there in horse races. In fact, we could think that the strong resistance of Rhodes to the siege of Mithridates VI during his First War against Rome was probably due to the presence in this island of an important number of Roman troops which had taken there refuge after the Pontic victories in Asia.

We will not deal with the different aims of the Greeks who joined Mithridates against Rome. What seems clear in our sources is that this Greek support, if not unanimous, was enthusiastic in many places. This attitude would provoke, among other aspects, the latter reprisals by the Roman power.

But we are now turning again our eyes to the proper land of Pontus. As we have seen, there were Greek *poleis* in the coastal region of the kingdom: Amastris, Abonuteichos, Sinope and Amisos. To them we must add Pharnakeia, founded by Pharnaces I with the *synoecism* of Cotyora and Cerasus, two little Sinopean settlements. But Mithridates Eupator was who, founding cities in inland Pontus (Mithridation, Eupatoria, Cabeira and perhaps Laodiceia), tried to give an important impulse to the urban life in his kingdom. We have several problems to study this aspect. In the first place, the lack of precision in the classical sources, in which the

terminology to establish a difference between city and village does not frequently precise the urban characteristics of a concrete settlement, and in particular regarding the barbarian countries. As Hansen affirmed, "The *komai* inhabited by more civilized barbarians were villages which cultered around a palace or even a proper *polis*". Strabo, our main source about Pontus, is sometimes surprisingly inaccurate in the description of his homeland, as was said by Ronald Syme. Although this ancient writer states clearly what is a Greek city and what is a non-Greek one, we have sometimes many problems to understand him. For example, Strabo speaks about twelve Greek cities in Cappadocia and Cilicia whose inhabitants were deported by Tigranes II to his new capital, Tigranocerta. If Strabo tells only about two (non-Greek) cities in Cappadocia (Mazaca and Tyana), we can not find in Cilicia the other ten Greek *póleis*. We have examples of this same problem in regard with Pontus: Abonuteichos, which is named *pólisma* by Strabo, had in the II century B.C. *phratriai* and civic priesthoods, that may reflect a civic life which could have been related with political institutions. Side, East of Amisos, is named *polis* by Stephan of Bizance (probably following Hecateus), but other sources regard this settlement as an *apoikía*. Pontic Comana is called as "a very great village" by Appian. Beside these examples, Cabeira, where Mithridates established one of his royal residences, became a *politeía* when Pompeius established the Roman Province of Bithynia and Pontus. Although Strabo calls Amasia, his birthplace, as a *polis*, he does not clarify if this town was one of the eleven *politeíai* founded by Pompey. These civic districts were based on former *póleis*, royal foundations, or native settlements. There are many doubts that, despite the terms used by Strabo, those foundations could have a real meaning as *póleis*. But it is frequently forgotten that Pompeius enacted rules to consolidate and preserve the civic population, and these measures may indicate that the Roman general considered that his foundations were viable. To all these examples, we must add the possible existence of cities which would not be mentioned in the literary sources, as it is the case of Hanisa in Cappadocia.

We have very little evidence to concretize better this policy of strengthening of the cities: for one side, Mithridates conferred to different settlements of Pontus the right to mint coins with the name of the place. In this same sense, we must regard that there were Greek settlements in Colchis as well as in Bosphorus, that, precisely now, began to mint coins with the name of the city. On the other side, we have an epigraphic evidence that shows how Mithridates tried to favour the cities, giving them the inheritances of the citizens who were died without a testament. As was stated by Saprykin, this measure shows a different behaviour than that was customary in other Hellenistic kingdoms.

The aforementioned confusions, together with the scarce number of evidences, have provoked biased interpretations about civic life in Pontus. The scholarship critical towards Mithridates has considered that as the royal foundations as the minting of civic coins were aspects of a mere policy of make-up, that made some barbarian villages to have a mirage of autonomy. In this same sense, there have been several critics towards the civic life in Mithridates' kingdom: for one side, it is said that the Greek cities had a little *chora*, and, on the other side, it is said that the level of autonomy of these cities depended on Mithridates' will. The first of these opinions was discussed in my book on Mithridates, and it differs from several notices from different authors, and in particular from Strabo, who could have been regarded in his *Geography* the extension of the Pontic cities. It has been recently published (Klio 2002) an inscription about an *astynomos* of Sinope: he may be a magistrate related to the urban center, in opposition to the rest of the *chora*. The second objection, that is, the lack of freedom of the Pontic cities, forgets the limits of the autonomy in the Hellenistic *póleis*. The presence of royal garrisons was a normal situation in many cities, and yet more if we are talking about a period of war, as that is described in the most of our literary sources on Mithridates. Furthermore, we have several inscriptions in which the Greek cities of the Euxinus give honours

to the commanders of the Pontic garrisons, or to the troops themselves.

Despite of the scant evidence, we can affirm that the Pontic Kings respected in some way the internal autonomy of the Greek cities in their kingdom. In those cities, we have evidences about magistrates and meetings of the assembly. As was usual in other Hellenistic kingdoms, these civic institutions had as only limit the royal interest, above all regarding foreign policy. Apart from the civic coinage, we have other evidences of the political institutions in the Pontic cities. To the inscription of Amastris, we could add the example of Sinope when this city was besieged by Lucullus. In this city arises a debate about the convenience to resist the Roman troops, and the citizens can defend their opinions without any punishment by the royal garrison of the city. In fact, although these same troops fled from Sinope, we must keep in mind that Lucullus, after having conquered it, put to death eight thousand people, who were no doubt supporters of Mithridates. Cities as Amisos and Heraclea Pontica could help people who was against Mithridates, without any sort of punishment from the king.

But, as we have seen, there not only were *poleis* in Pontus. The most of the territory had a native population, which lived in urban or semi-urban settlements, or in great temple-states, or in far regions of mountains. This great diversity of situations, furthermore in a land conquered by its rulers, lead us to one of the main questions about the Pontic kingdom: had the subjects of the Mithridatids an own identity? This aspect is very difficult to study for the lack of evidences contemporary to the period we are studying. We must note previously several aspects: in the first place, we must remember that the Pontic kingdom was a territory that had resisted for many time to a whole submission to the Persian Empire. (We could indeed speak about the Gasga tribes which fought with the Hittites). After Alexander's death, these regions were under the rule of the Cappadocian kings, or of little local dynasts, as was the enigmatic Antipater, son of Sisis, who ruled Armenia Minor at the end of the II century B.C.

Furthermore, the time in which the Mithridatids had ruled over those territories had been very little: less than two hundred and fifty years in the best of the cases. Therefore, we face therefore nor to an autochthonous dynasty nor to rulers stablished for many time in a territory. Beside this, did not exist in Pontus a sigle culture that could serve as a common reference for all the subjects of Mithridates. As we have told, in this kingdom there were different peoples: the main part of Pontus was occupied by the so-called Syrians, or Leucosyrians, which have been identified as remains of Indo-European peoples from Neo-Assyrian times. But the term "Leucosyrian" (White-syrian) was not exclusive of Pontus, and so we could think that this word was used by the Greeks to name different autochthonous peoples of Anatolia. Furthermore, our sources do not make clear if those Leucosyrians can be identified with those peoples who are called Cappadocians in a general sense: in fact, Strabo describes the Cappadocians of Pontus as descendants from former Scythian migrations. Solinus, probably quoting Plinius, tells that the Eastern part of Cappadocia (I think that he is alluding to Pontic Cappadocia) is situated in Scythia. Strabo said also that the wall of Zela was built to defend the place from the Scythian invaders. And finally, in a general sense, we must regard that the Euxinus was consered as an Scythian sea.

With this situation, there are doubts on the existence of a true Pontic identity. To support this opinion the main argument is the lack of terms alluding to the subjects of the Pontic dynasty, and in particular of Mithridates Eupator, as "Pontics". But, to this hypothesis, we may propose some remarks: In the first place, we must remember that in the Hellenistic world the king embodied the kingdom. Just in the Pontic case, while Mithridates was alive, the Romans did not consider that the war was over, and the influence of the Pontic power in Pontus was demonstrated when Eupator came back from his exile in Armenia, and defeated the Roman troops which had occupied his ancestral dominions. On the other side, the term "Ponticus" to make allusion to the inhabitants of this kingdom appears in fact in the litterary

sources. It is true that those texts are not contemporary of Mithridates Eupator, and, for that reason, Mitchell affirmed that the term "Ponticus" was not used until the establishment of the Province of *Bithynia et Pontus* by Pompeius. This author bases his hypothesis on two arguments: that the first known references to "Pontics" alluding to the subjects of the Mithridatids come from the *Bellum Alexandrinum*, and that Strabo tells that this meaning of the term "Ponticus" is recent when he is writing his *Geography*. Certainly, it was not new that the Roman provinces had the name of Geographic regions larger than the annexed territory (Africa or Asia, for example). Therefore, it was recognized that the ancestral kingdom of Mithridates was not in a single region, and so the new province could not be named as "Cappadocia on the Euxinus" or "Paphlagonia". On other hand, to call Mithridates' kingdom as "Pontus" reflected the importance given to the rule of this King over the Black Sea. But we could propose several remarks on Mitchell's hypothesis. There is a reference former than the one what he proposes: it is a fragment of Sallust's *Histories*, from which we could infer that the term "Pontus" is used to designate the territories whose capital was Sinope. It is a passage referred to the treaties between Mithridates and Sertorius. (...) And we know from Cicero that the ambassadors of Sertorius sailed from Dianium in Spain just to Sinope. Furthermore, there are scarce remaining contemporary sources about Mithridates. Apart from the fragments of Poseidonios, or from presumed passages of Sulla's *Memoirs*, we have only the works of Cicero. So, we can understand that, as the Greeks who were sorry for his support to the king, as the pro-Roman writers, would have preferred the term "Cappadocian" to allude to the inhabitants of Pontus, due to its despective sense (Mommsen used this term in a similar way).

With this obscure background, we must pay attention to a phrase from the speech of Mithridates to his troops in 88 B.C., regarded by Pompeius Trogus: None of the subject peoples... (aquí viene un pasaje que puedo copiar)....

It is an interesting passage, which offers different perspectives. For one side, it is an exaltation of the autochtony and the invictous character of the Pontic kingdom. The classical literary tradition regarded different peoples which were proud to have resisted the power of the great universal empires: such was the case of the Scythians, the Iberians of Caucasia, the Nabateans, and, as we see, the Pontics.

In regard with to have only their own kings, we face with the antithesis of the Roman history: in the list of the Roman Kings that Mithridates presents in this same speech, there is not only a negative view, as Briquel pointed out, but also, particularly, the Pontic ruler emphasizes on the foreign origin of all the mentioned examples: Aborigines (Romulus), Sabini (Numa), Greeks (Tarquinius Priscus), and Etruscan (Servius Tullius). Therefore, Rome would have been a state without Roman kings, and this may be connected with the anti-Roman *topos* of the Republic's hate towards all the monarchies. At the same time, it is remarkable the exaltation of the Pontic autochtony face the Romans, who are considered by their enemies as lacking of an own homeland. So, it is remembered that Rome was sited on a territory robbed to their former inhabitants, what is also a negative interpretation of the legend of the Trojan origin of the Roman people. On the contrary, the Mithridatids are exalted as the "own" kings of their people, and therefore they are the genuine rulers of their territory.

Those phrases from Trogus are of course the result of a manipulation, because, for one side, they forget the Achaemenid and Seleucid origin of the Pontic dynasty, remembered by Trogus in this same speech. On the other side, it seems that Trogus ignores that the Mithridatid dominion over this region was recent. It seems clear that the dynastic propaganda of the Mithridatids would have spread that their rule in those land was old, because, as Polybius stated, Darius would have given this country to the ancestors of the dynasty. The proud

regarding Pontic independence is related above all with the campaigns of Alexander the Great. But, curiously, the Pontic king does not speak about the Persian rule over his territory, and, in the same speech, Mithridates remembers the failure of Cyrus and Darius against the Scythians. It seems that Mithridates tries to appear as the result of an union of the glory of Persians and Macedonians: he is a heir of them, but he is also surpassing them, and his destiny is to exercise the definitive power in the whole *oikoumene*.

But, perhaps, the most interesting aspect for us would not only be the truthfulness of these phrases of Mithridates, but also the reason why they are told. For one side, the speech is an exaltation of the Pontic glory when the war with Rome had just begun. On the other side, the speech tries to present the Mithridatid dynasty as the common point of reference of all the peoples which lived in this reign, whose extension had been increased during the reign of Mithridates VI. In this sense, we must remember how Cassius Dio speaks about the reverence of the inhabitants of Pontus towards Mithridates Eupator, because he represented for them the embodiment of the ancestral Kingship.

To sum up, it is clear that the Pontic dynasty, and in particular Mithridates Eupator, tried to give an own identity to the inhabitants of their kingdom. It not only was a measure developed for the war with Rome, but also to consolidate the status of Pontus, and to confirm the role of this kingdom as an hegemonic power in the Black Sea. This policy can be traced at least since the beginning of the II century B.C., when Pharnaces I adopted the god Men as protector of the dynasty, so relating the royal power with the ancestral traditions.

As many other Hellenistic dynasties, the Mithridatids knew how to make compatible the respect towards the traditions, the sanctuaries, the internal organization of different tribes, with a philhellenic policy that showed different perspectives. What seems clear is that the Pontic rulers tried to give cohesion to their kingdom, inserting the Greek *poleis* into a framework of tribal peoples which received, when it seemed possible, an urban character and, perhaps, civic rights. The frustrated plans of Mithridates hinder an exact evaluation of the real meaning of that policy of reforms. A policy diminished by the lack of evidences and the excessive historiographical prejudices had insisted to diminish.