

The Policy of Mithridates Eupator and the North Coast of the Black Sea

Saprykin Sergey

The Northern Black Sea Littoral was a very important part of the Pontic kingdom under king Mithridates VI. Although it was included into the Kingdom of Pontus only in the late 2nd c BC, close contacts with the Greek cities of Pontic Cappadocia and Paphlagonia, the heart of the Pontic kingdom, were established many decades before, owing to historically long relations of Sinope, Amisus and Trapezous with Tyra, Olbia, Chersonesus, Bosphorus. Sinope was a main trading partner of the Black Sea cities and surrounding barbarians since the 5th c BC which is evident from a tremendous amount of its amphora ware and amphora stamps of the early 4th – late 3rd c BC. Amisus was also rather active in trade with the Greek Euxine colonies: terracotta figures, jewellery, especially the masks of Dionysos, different Satyroi and Silens actively spread into all Hellenic sites of the coast, being an important part of the Dionysos' cult within the 3rd – 1st c BC. They were so widespread that local pottery-makers produced their imitations, not less popular than the originals. We are aware of many citizens of Sinope and Amisus in Bosphoran cities and Tauric Chersonesus, who constantly lived and even died there, having left gravestones in Panticapaeum, Hermonassa, Phanagoria, Olbia etc. It shows that these cities became their new mother-land.

Proxenic decrees, adopted in Olbia, Chersonesus and even by the tyrants of Bosphorus in honour of Sinopeans and Amisenois in the 4th – 2nd c BC also testify close political and commercial relations with the Greeks of the South Black Sea region. Rather significant seems to be a decree of Paerisades I of Bosphorus and his sons in honour of a certain son of Dionysios from Piraeus, as Amisus was called since the Pericles' sea expedition to Pontus; not less interesting is the proxenic decree of Chersonesus which honoured Menophilus, son of Menophilus from Sinope in the 2nd c BC just on the eve of the Pontic protectorate over the city.

Commercial influence of Amisus is becoming particularly clear from numismatics. Its silver drachms were discovered in Nikonion, Tyritake, Phanagoria, Chersonesus etc, being so popular and numerous that the silver coins of Phanagoria and Gorgippia of the so-called "pseudo-autonomous" mint of Mithridates Eupator were overstruck from the Amisene silver drachms and triobols with the type of Hera, issued by Amisus in the 4th–2nd c BC. Amisus had very close links with Bosphorus: the late bronze coins of the Spartocids were of yellow copper which could have been brought only from the region of Amisus.

No less important and intensive were the relations between the Pontic kings and the Greeks of the Black Sea. Since the reign of Mithridates I Ctistes in the first half of the 3rd c BC the Kingdom of Pontus was trying to find a way of how to get to the coast of the Euxine and that was one reason why it became a member of the Northern League, created by Byzantium, Heraclea, Tium, Cierus to withstand the Seleucid expansion. But Mithridates' membership in the League was not long and lasted since 281 until around 278 BC, having brought no reasonable profits for the king in terms of getting out to the Black Sea. Mithridates achieved this goal only in the early 260s BC when an important harbour of Amastris was handed over to them by Eumenes, a member of the future ruling dynasty of Pergamum. While possessing this city Pontus could spread influence along the coast of the Black Sea in Asia Minor, aiming to enlarge its ambitions at the expense of the other Black Sea states in future.

A first serious aggressive motion to Euxine was made by king Mithridates III who tried to capture Sinope in 220 BC but unsuccessfully. By that time Pontus had its own fleet mostly of Amastris and Amisene ships, and it made it possible to reach the north coast of

the Black Sea, the more so that both main sea-ways there were passing by the coast, now in hands of the kings. But we have no information about any contacts of the Pontic kingdom with the north of the Euxine at that period of time. The Crimean Greeks preferred to have commercial links with Hellenic cities like Byzantium, Heraclea, Rhodes, Cos, as well as with Ptolemaic Egypt which played an important role around and inside the Euxine region.

The first real step of Pontic kings towards the political arena of the Black Sea region is dated to the reign of Pharnaces I. As an initial attempt to do this he firstly seized Sinope and made it his capital in 183 BC, then waged a war against Pergamum, Bithynia and Cappadocia in order to enlarge his kingdom's territory in Anatolia. The king captured Tium, having strengthened positions on the sea. But in 179 BC Pharnaces was defeated and agreed to sign a peace in accordance with which he had to pay out a huge contribution and withdraw his troops from all captured territories. Rome was carefully following the events and when creating a new political situation in Asia Minor after the peace with Pharnaces managed to spread its influence to East Anatolia, having turned the Pontic king from an enemy into a friend and ally. Not without Rome's insistence several Greek cities of the Black Sea coast were included into this treaty of peace as being neutral during the wartime but, as assigned to the treaty, could keep independence under patronage of the Roman Republic. These were Heraclea Pontica, Tauric Chersonesus, Mesembria, Cyzicus. Pharnaces, who until now started a Philhellenic policy and tried to show his pro-Roman sympathies, used this situation for expanding influence to the Black Sea area and establishing closer links with the Greek cities. The treaty was also signed by a Sarmatian king Gatales, who at that time was on bad terms with the Scythians of Scilouros. Epigraphy shows good terms which Pharnaces had with Amaseia, Athens, Delos, and with the Euxine cities Odessos and Tauric Chersonesus. The latter, pressed by the Scythians of the Crimea who were keen to swallow up a part of its agricultural territory in the Northwest Taurica, eagerly held up to a strong ally, having concluded in 179 BC a treaty of friendship and alliance with Pharnaces I. This document, known from the inscription, found in Chersonesus, contained a special paragraph, according to which the Pontic king promised to assist Chersonesus if any of the barbarians threaten its possessions, but with one important condition – to keep friendship with Rome. That is the first remark on Roman Black Sea policy and the first real evidence on Pontus' involvement to the North Pontic affairs. It seems difficult to underestimate this as it is a main future base for Eupator's Black Sea policy. So we can be really sure that the Pontic Greeks began to look at the Kingdom of Pontus as their potential ally only since its rulers conducted the Philhellenic and Philoroman policy.

During the early years of Mithridates Eupator's reign a lot of Greeks held official positions in the state, mostly of them were outcomers from Amisus. They helped the king with closer acknowledgment in the Pontic affairs. Amisus which had good relations with the other Euxine Hellenic poleis, assisted Mithridates in his diplomatic activity: the envoy of Mithridates VI who came to Tauric Chersonesus on the eve of the Diophantos' campaign, was also a citizen of Amisus. The first Greek cities who passed under the protectorate of Mithridates, were Olbia and Chersonesus. It happened immediately when the Sarmatians (Roxolani), former Chersonesian allies against the Scythians, took the side of the Scythian king Scylouros and his son Palacus in the last quarter of the 2nd c BC. By that time Olbia and Chersonesus in particular lost all their domains, while Olbia recognized finally the power of the Scythian kingdom, Chersonesus was unable to withstand the Scythian pressure and asked Mithridates to give help. Tauric Chersonesus was chosen by the king a main strategic point for the future expansion to the north, so he had to renew a mutual treaty about friendship and alliance, signed during the reign of Pharnaces, and for

that purpose the abovementioned envoy came to the city. Later on approximately between 115 and 108 BC a famous Diophantus campaign was organized especially for subjugating the Scythians and the local Greeks. It was held presumably in accordance with a new treaty, conducted earlier by the son of Kephala from Amisus, the royal envoy to Chersonesus. After killing his mother and younger brother Chrestus in around 115 BC and before starting a policy of submitting Paphlagonia Mithridates had a chance to embrace his power to the northern coast of the Black Sea, and he successfully used it. For already two years his generals were waging war against the Sarmatians and the Scythians, as we know from Strabo. But it seemed to be not very successful, so when the Scythians came close to the walls of Tauric Chersonesus, the king decided to send his general Diophantus with an order to achieve a victory over the Scythians and to hold negotiations about the passing of power over the Kingdom of Bosphorus from Paerisades V to Mithridates Eupator.

Numismatics, mainly the bronze coins of Mithridatic mint of the 111 – 105 BC indicate the early time of their subjection to the Pontic kingdom; the first campaign of Diophantus brought only a temporary submittance of the Scythians, but helped Olbia and Chersonesus to take back their domains from the Scythians; the second campaign began amidst the Scythians again broke the peace and came up to Chersonesus, having again captured his territorial possessions. Diophantus once more appeared with his army and fleet, immediately took Chabae, Neapolis and Palacium, then turned to the Northwest Crimea and recaptured Cercinitis and Calos Limen, having again restored the city's possessions. That was the main reason why Chersonesus constantly supported the king in all his actions, being quite satisfied with his Philhellenic policy. The same was with the Bosphoran Greeks, who were suffering from Sarmatian tribute on them and were eager to come under the power of Pontus as a main provider of Philhellenic policy. This good attitude of the local Greeks helped Diophantus to make a final defeat of Palacus and once more submit the Crimean Scythian kingdom. After that Bosphorus in the face of Paerisades V recognized Mithridates V as an ancestral sovereign and that was an official condition of Paerisades giving the throne to Mithridates Eupator, probably, as his adopted son. The latter action allowed the king of Pontus to rule Bosphorus as his ancestral domain along with Colchis, Paphlagonia, Pontic Cappadocia, Armenia Minor. The Scythians finally tried not to give up their positions in Panticapaeum and prevent the passing of power there to the king of Pontus by a certain kind of revolt under the command of a Scythian noble Saumacus, but Diophantus again helped the king and suppressed the Scythians, having at last put Bosphorus under Pontic rule.

Tyras was the last city of that region to become a part of Pontic state and it happened in the late 2nd or early 1st c BC. Since then the Mithridatic policy on the northern shore of the Black Sea was characterized by such features as:

Philhellenism towards the Greek city states, the king allowed some of them (Chersonesus, Panticapaeum, Phanagoria, Gorgippia) in 90 – 80 BC to strike even silver coins with the names of the cities – a prerogative which even the Paphlagonian and Pontic cities were deprived of; It shows that the king initially based his policy on supporting the Greek city – states in order to use the potential of their chorai for supplying Pontus with agriculture and other goods, for that purpose he returned Chersonesus and Olbia their rural possessions but only under control of royal Pontic garrisons.

Mithridates organized garrisons in the main points of his new North Pontic territories particularly in Scythia where they were installed in the main forts (Neapolis, Ust Alma etc and in the North West Taurica) until 96 BC when they were withdrawn in accordance with Rome's demand to return to the Scythian rulers their ancestral domains. But it didn't break up Mithridatic influence in Scythia, as the king managed to conclude treaties with

the main barbaric chiefs. He even kept this close relations with them until his defeat by the romans in course of the Third War in 74-63 BC, probably because he did not refuse to return these possession back to the Scythians in 96 BC and this act was estimated not as sujugation of the Scyhtian lands, but as simple allience. This was the reason why the Scythians actively served in the Pontic troops.

The situation with the Sarmatians and the Bastarnae was much more complicated, as they were submitted later than the Scythians. They recognized the power of Pontus after the wars of Neoptolemus with the Sarmatians and the Bastarnae in around 91-88 BC, and we are aware of that from the description of Plutarch, Strabo and one inscription from Nymphaeum where the king, called *basileus basileon*, is honoured for boons to the Nymphaits and for the liberation from the barbarian threat either.

Bosporus with Chersonesus and Olbia were a part of ancestral Pontic domains and they were given under the rule of the eldest son of Eupator – Mithridates the Younger until 83 BC, when he was accused in betray and assassinated; since then Machares, another king's son, was put to rule over the north Pontic regions, chiefly at Bosporus, but the barbarians like the Maeotae, Scythians, Sarmatians etc were considered to be his allies, though they also recognized him as their king. Bosporus along with Colchis and Armenia Minor were his hereditary possessions; since 83/ 81 BC when Mithridates changed his policy towards the Greeks from Philhellenistic to a more strickt ruling with suppressing all kinds of polis freedom, the Pontic administration began to create a kind of royal land in Bosporus and simultaneously Chersonesus lost a part of its chora again as being now under the control of the Scythians and Bosporan governors.

Mithridates' policy in the north was rather severe since the first rebellion of the local Greeks in 81 BC and since then he tured to the barbarians; during the Third war with Rome Mithridates put a hard tribute upon the cities and the natives, though the most part of the heavy taxation was bestowed upon the Greeks. That was one of the main reason why they firstly supported Machares who decided to fell off the king and to take the side of the Romans, and later in 63 BC actively took the side of Pharnaces I who managed to revolt against his father and become a king of Bosporus not without the Roman help. The paradox is that though the Greeks didn' t enjoy Mithridates' policy against Rome they still honoured him after his death and the name of the great king remained popular at bosporus until the early Imperial period.