

BOSPORUS ON THE VERGE OF THE CHRISTIAN ERA
(OUTLINES OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT)

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Generally it was believed that the Bosporan Kingdom suffered a deep social and economic crisis starting in the late 2nd-early 1st century BC. This became much worse after its incorporation into the Pontic Kingdom in the reign of Mithridates VI Eupator in *ca.* 110-107 BC, and continued until the second half of the 1st century AD. Apparently, the crisis came to an end with the establishment of a local Sarmatian dynasty at Panticapaeum. There is much archaeological evidence on which this conclusion can be based, as well as evidence from the ancient authors. They testify to the devastation and destruction of sites in both the European and Asiatic Bosphorus. The ruination of some buildings in cities such as Myrmekion and Panticapaeum was also identified. The time span for the destruction was estimated to be late 2nd century BC-1st century AD, which encompasses all the events connected with Mithridatic rule of the Bosphorus, the fight of Pharnaces I for his ancestral domain, the struggle between Asander and Mithridates of Pergamum, the rule of Polemo I of Pontus there, his struggle with the Aspurgians, the coming to power of Aspurgus, and the conflict of Mithridates VIII (III of Bosphorus) with Rome. Thereafter, as the popular interpretation has it, something of a revival took place in the political, economic and social life of the Bosphorus thanks to Sarmatian influence in all spheres of Bosporan society. This interpretation was long dominant; some still follow it (Gaidukevich 1949, 320-84; *cf.* Vinogradov 1994, 151-70). However, if we look carefully at the period of Bosporan history which begins with the incorporation of the kingdom into the Pontic state of Mithridates VI, we can identify some interesting moments in economic circumstances and policies pursued. Recent archaeological investigation has brought to light a great amount of material which contradicts the established interpretation, particularly for the late 1st century BC-early 1st century AD: large rural estates and forts existed throughout the agrarian territory of the state; and a great number of coins was struck in the course of the 1st century BC, particularly at the beginning of that century in silver, and during the reigns of Pharnaces I, Asander, Dynamis, and (before and after he obtained the royal title) Aspurgus in gold. This actually contradicts the thesis of deep

stagnation and economic crisis in the Bosphorus. So too does the active policy of the Bosporan rulers at that time, particularly with respect to Tauric Chersonesus, piracy in the Black Sea, and the Scythians and other native peoples on the kingdom's borders. In the time of Asander, the Bosporan Kingdom succeeded in standing against numerous barbarian tribes in the Crimea and around Lake Maeotis. It was able to resist Polemo I of Pontus, and Rome (which stood behind him) – an almost impossible task had the kingdom been weak and incapable of action at that time, as some are inclined to believe.

How should these events be understood and explained? The main purpose of this paper is to show that the view of deep crisis and decline in the Bosporan Kingdom during the 1st century BC and 1st century AD is improbable. To confirm this we need to turn to the history of Pontus, and to some extent that of the Bosporan Kingdom, from the time of Mithridates VI and during the reigns of Polemo I and Pythodoris. In this connexion, I would like to focus attention on the fate of 'Hellenism' in the Black Sea region in the time of the early Roman Empire. The Bosporan Kingdom may be used as an example for other states which had kept their Hellenic traditions and mode of life since the end of the Hellenistic period – 30 BC – when Rome subjected Egypt under Augustus.

The Pontic Kingdom passed through several stages of development, in the course of which it managed to unify a number of cities in eastern Anatolia, as well as those of the southern Black Sea coast, and by the time of Mithridates VI it was already a strong Hellenistic state with a well developed economy and a culture of mixed Iranian, Anatolian, and Greek elements. This base helped Mithridates VI to create a pan-Pontic power which united all the centres of the regions but enjoyed different levels of economic prosperity and development because of the great number of territories and ethnic groups incorporated into the state close to the end of the 2nd-beginning of the 1st century BC. Unfortunately, the relations between *polis*, *chora*, and royal power in the Pontic Kingdom have not attracted scholarly interest, which has concentrated instead on the political history of the kingdom and its military conflict with Rome. Only in the last few years the problems of agrarian relations and of its social and economic structure have received attention. Moreover, most scholars have limited themselves to Pontic Cappadocia and ignored the lands of the northern Black Sea littoral. Therefore, I shall concentrate on the influence of the policy of the Pontic kings on cities in the northern and (in part) eastern Black Sea – a policy which had proved its value in eastern Anatolia. Such centres were, like the Bosporan Kingdom, Colchis, Tauric Chersonesus, and Olbia, incorporated into the Pontic Kingdom – and Bosphorus and Colchis were even considered by the kings to be their ancestral or 'royal' domains. The lands and Greek *poleis* of the western Black Sea region were only protectorates of Mithridates VI, and were never considered as his hereditary possessions.

After the fall of Mithridates in 63 BC, his successors in the Bosphorus, and partly in Colchis, continued his internal policy. This is why it seems interesting to trace the revival of 'Mithridatism' in these lands long after the death of its creator. It is necessary to make a brief survey of the internal policy of the Pontic kings in eastern Anatolia and in the Black Sea region, to show how it survived during the time when the Zenonids of Pontus came to power and, with Roman assistance, came to rule over the former Mithridatic possessions.

Before the time of Mithridates VI, the Greek *poleis* situated in the hinterland of eastern Anatolia were actually a rather weak part of the administrative system of Pontus. Only coastal cities such as Amisus, Amastris, and Sinope (from 183 BC) retained some of the features of a *polis* community and a small amount of autonomy in internal political life. In the hinterland of the kingdom, cities were practically absent, except, probably, Amaseia, the ancient capital, and temple-cities, such as Comana Pontica, Zela, and Ameria, which had more Persian and Anatolian features than Greek (Debord 1982, 163-70). They obtained privileges only in the time of Mithridates VI, lacking any political freedom until then: the bronze coins of Amaseia were minted only at the beginning of the last quarter of the 2nd century BC; those of Comana Pontica only at the beginning of the last decade of that century (Saprykin 1996, 248-66). In contrast, the Greek coastal cities had begun minting before the time of Mithridates VI, some of them even in precious metal – silver (Malloy 1970, 7-10). Only Pharnaces I began a policy of creating new cities: Pharnacia, named after him, was founded as *synoikismos* of Cortyora and Cerasus, the former colonies of Sinope. In the 2nd century BC Pharnacia had a right to strike coins with its own legend, which could indicate the acquisition of a certain amount of political autonomy, though limited by royal power. The right to have their own mints given to the Greek coastal cities, and its absence for the cities of the interior, can be explained by the fact that the rulers of Pontus were seeking to act as patrons of the Greek residents of their kingdom, as mediators in relations with the Aegean and the Black Sea. In so far as the inhabitants of these cities had enjoyed *polis* privileges from ancient times, the Pontic kings could hardly succeed in depriving them of their autonomy completely, although they did so in part. This is confirmed by the lack of coin-minting in Amastris in the late 3rd-early 2nd century BC under Mithridates III and Pharnaces I (Kruglikova/Saprykin 1991, 89-93), and by the cessation of amphora- and tile-stamping in Sinope immediately after its seizure by Pharnaces I in 183 BC and its conversion into a capital of the Pontic Kingdom (Saprykin 1996, 71). Nevertheless, they were anxious to strengthen their power and influence there having, from the time of Pharnaces I, pursued a so-called Philhellenic policy, which brought them later success during conflict with Rome (McGing 1986, 109-11).

Ancient authors – especially Strabo, who was born there – make it clear that

Amaseia, like the neighbouring city of Zela, was constantly suppressed by the kings and its agrarian possessions seriously reduced (being included in the category of so-called 'royal' land). The same probably happened to other cities, mostly where they had extensive areas of *polis* land, for example, in Sinope and Amisus. At the same time special royal magistrates were appointed to these cities, mainly to supervise the execution of royal decrees and edicts and the payment of taxes by the citizenry to the royal treasury. Even in temple-centres such as Comana and Zela, the chief priests were at the same time official royal rulers, probably as *strategoi*, in charge of all spheres of life in the administrative units of which those centres were a part. Small Greek cities, such as Abonuteichus not far from Sinope, were completely subject to a royal official – *strategos* or *dioiketes*, a local official who ruled over a corresponding district of the kingdom. In this case many of the Hellenic cities had really lost a great deal of their political and economic freedom. To return to Abonuteichus, this ancient Milesian colony had managed to keep its *phratriai* – initial political and administrative institutions. At first they served for granting citizenship, as in other Greek cities in the time of their prosperity, which permitted the possession of land plots in the *polis* community. But in the second half of the 2nd century BC the *phratriai* of Abonuteichus were deprived of their former political and economic functions, being turned into ordinary, semi-religious, semi-cultural units. As an inscription of the time of Mithridates V Euergetes informs us, in the 2nd century BC they were completely under the influence of royal power and even got money from royal officials, who thereby secured high positions and various honours and privileges there. Thereafter we hear of no land holding by citizens in *phratriai*, because most of the land was now considered to be royal and belonged to the king as supreme landowner. Only Sinope and Amisus managed to keep a small amount of land as *polis* property 'adjacent' to the city, unlike the time when they possessed vast areas of coast far from the walls (Maksimova 1956, 189-97; Saprykin 1986, 113-20; 1996, 206-28).

From the middle of the 2nd century BC Pontic rulers pursued a Philhellenic policy, which brought them into good relations with the Greeks practically everywhere. It also made them more pacific towards the Romans, as in the cases of Pharnaces I and Mithridates IV and V. Mutual connexions with coastal cities of the Black Sea littoral became closer: suffering internal political and economic troubles, they were keen to be on good terms with the Pontic Kingdom and the Greek cities under its sway. This was reflected in the policy of the kings towards their Hellenic subjects inside the country: animation of *phratriai* in cities as religious and cultural institutions and the founding of new cities are connected with the rise of Pontus in the time of Mithridates V. Having established close links with the Greek world and making advances to their own Hellenic subjects, the Pontic kings sought to improve the rather poor economic situation of their kingdom after the

unsuccessful war of 183-179 BC in Asia Minor and the stiff penalties imposed on them by the peace treaty of 179 BC. Although stimulating Greek political and cultural traditions, the kings always remained fully Iranian both in their mode of life and rule. While supporting to some extent *polis* rights and privileges, assisting in the creation of new cities (Laodiceia, Pharnacia, Eupatoria, Mithridatium), and turning some former royal forts on *ge basilike* into *poleis* (Chabaca, Gaziura, Pimolisene, Taulara), Mithridates V, and his son and successor Mithridates VI, still remained the supreme owners of all the land in the kingdom. As a result *polis* landowning, an indispensable feature of any Philhellenic policy, was put into great dependence upon royal landowning, which was constantly limiting the political and economic rights of Greek cities. This caused a strengthening of royal land *phiskus*, based on forts, fortified sites and royal castles of the *katoikiai* or *kleruchiai*-type, *i.e.* military-economic settlements. To control the area, they helped the Pontic kings to raise taxation and restrain separatism among the Greeks, with their traditional wish for autonomy. The Greek cities had their own military units in the royal army: commanders and officials of Greek origin occupied almost all leading positions in the military and administrative hierarchy of the kingdom: Amisus was in the first rank here because its representatives were engaged in all spheres of the official life of the state. It helped to create an intimate union between the Greeks and the royal administration (Maksimova 1956, 203-6).

The ordinary population was mostly of Cappadocian and Iranian origin, which is why the main military forces were formed at the expenses of the local inhabitants: garrisons in the Greek cities all over the country and abroad – in Asia Minor and the Black Sea region – were composed of ethnic natives. The picture was the same in the forts on royal lands, including those which had been erected not far from the Greek cities to obtain some political control of agrarian relations. This helped to keep the cities under royal control and, at the same time, to develop their economies at the expenses of agriculture, commerce, and links with different regions of the Pontic Kingdom in both Asia Minor and the Black Sea. In so far as the Greek *poleis* of the southern Black Sea had, since ancient times, been traditional partners of the Greeks on the northern Black Sea coast, the economic rise of *poleis* in the Pontic Kingdom, along with a certain decline of *poleis* in the northern Black Sea, was an inducement for the latter to attach themselves firmly to the Pontic monarchs, already known as Philhellenes. No less important was the image of these rulers as supporters of economic activity, trade, crafts, and agriculture among their Greek subjects and in other areas of the Black Sea. The situation developed in such a manner that the Greeks of the Bosphorus and their neighbours in other parts of the region voluntarily adhered to the Pontic Kingdom and recognised Mithridates VI as their ruler. In many respects this depended on the Mithridatic economic policy of the second half of the 2nd century BC.

It is now time to examine the effects of this policy in the Bosporan Kingdom, having turned it into a powerful and prosperous state with a strong army able to resist barbarian and even several Roman invasions. It is usually assumed that the ancient states of the northern Black Sea region were deep in crisis in the second half of the 2nd century BC, thanks to a contraction in the grain trade and constant barbarian raiding. By that time a large quantity of rural settlements in the European and Asiatic Bosphorus had ceased to function; the situation was the same in the *chora* of Olbia and in Tauric Chersonesus, where the agrarian territory was diminished by Scythian expansion. Archaeological investigations in Bosphorus show that many public buildings were destroyed at the turn of the 2nd/1st centuries BC, especially in Panticapaeum, Nymphaeum, and Myrmekion. In some cities defensive walls were seriously damaged or ruined. A fall in trading activity caused a strong decline of handicrafts; as a result, the import of goods from the Aegean was greatly reduced. Scholars see these events in the economy of the Black Sea states mirrored in the growth of taxes paid to the chiefs of native tribes, military resistance to Scythian and Sarmatian neighbours, and in social and economic contradictions caused by submitting to Mithridates VI, who increased the level of taxes paid to the Pontic royal treasury. The economic revival, many scholars believe, did not begin until the fall of Mithridates VI, when the active penetration of Greek cities by local elements began throughout the northern Black Sea littoral, but particularly in Bosphorus. The process of revival is usually dated to the 1st century AD and connected with the establishment of the so-called Sarmatian dynasty at Bosphorus (Blavatskii 1964, 135-43; Maslennikov 1985, 73; Desyatchikov 1974, 5-8).

The archaeological evidence from Bosphorus, particularly relating to its agrarian territory, enables us to make some major corrections to this suggested scheme. The northern Black Sea coast and Colchis were the main sources of food supply for Mithridates VI and his army, particularly when they were engaged in war with Rome: every year Bosphorus had to pay over 180.000 *medimnoi* of grain and 200 talents of silver, and the Black Sea region as a whole over 2.000.000 *medimnoi* of grain. Colchis supplied raw material for Mithridates' fleet. Bosphorus became a very important part of his kingdom when Mithridates VI resided there during his last campaign against Rome. From Panticapaeum he tried to put pressure upon the resident tribes in order to continue his struggle with Rome, planning to invade Italy through the Danube (Gaggero 1978, 294-305; Molev 1985, 286-93). Such a policy required increased taxes to support the army; it would hardly have been possible to raise them if the economies of the ancient centres of the northern Black Sea coast, including Bosphorus, had been completely destroyed. To impose heavy taxes on the region was a viable option only after some revival in economic activity, when the level of life both in cities and rural settlements had returned to normal. Before Mithridates VI the

economy of the Greek cities of Bosphorus was actually in very poor condition; in the course of the Mithridatic wars the population became discontented with heavy taxation. Thus, a primary aim of Mithridates was to cure this dissatisfaction among his new subjects. He could do this only by supporting crafts, trade, and other industry in the cities. No less important to him was the development of agriculture and farming – simply because it gave Pontus a real food supply. So the king had to resort to the Philhellenic policy, which had already proved so successful in Asia Minor, as a means of getting the Greek population of Bosphorus on his side.

At first the northern Black Sea coast was firmly included in the system of inter-Black Sea economic relations with the ancestral domains in Pontic Cappadocia and Paphlagonia. Bosphorus, together with Colchis, Olbia, and Tauric Chersonesus, was involved in the unified system of Pontic coinage so that the quasi-autonomous Pontic and Paphlagonian bronze coins actively penetrated the local coin market, having become the regional currency. As a result, depreciated local coins of small fractions were forced out of circulation. Active satiation of the local coin market with Pontic bronze coins is dated to the last decade of the second-first decade of the 1st century BC. Without doubt it helped to revive economic and commercial links between the Greek cities around the Black Sea. Numerous finds of these coins at rural sites of this period show the rise of the agrarian periphery during the reign of Mithridates VI (Golenko 1965, 308-10; Shelov 1978, 58-72; Saprykin 1996, 169-72).

As a second stage, Mithridates VI recognised the right of the Bosporan cities, Chersonesus and Olbia to strike their own coins. For Bosphorus and Tauric Chersonesus he even sanctioned the minting of silver coins – a privilege which in the Pontic Kingdom was given only to the royal mint (Anokhin 1986, 72-4; Saprykin 1996, 173). By this act he confirmed the autonomy and freedom of the largest cities of the northern Black Sea, as had been done earlier in regard to the Greek cities in his ancestral domain in Asia Minor. As a result, Panticapaeum, Phanagoria, Gorgippia, and Chersonesus managed some economic development (it is otherwise incomprehensible how these cities could strike silver coins if they were really as weak as is sometimes thought). The privileges granted by the king to these cities should be seen as a financial measure to increase the economic power of the *poleis* in preparation for conducting a long war with Rome. But this autonomy was in many respects illusory: the Greeks were strongly restricted in their attempts to look independent by the unification of coinage – Pontic Mithridatic symbols and types – along with control by royal officials. It was the same in social and economic affairs: together with a few political rights the king gave the *poleis* a certain amount of land spread among the citizens as individual property. It was regulated by the so-called ‘hereditary law of Eupator’, which helped official royal power to maintain control over *polis*-land (Saprykin 1996, 211-6). All of this confirms a visible revival of

the Bosporan economy, the more so in that the aforementioned law was kept by Mithridates' successors, doubtless for its economic and political advantages (Blavatskaya 1965, 197-200).

We are able to trace building activity in Bosporan cities: in Myrmekion the reconstruction of earlier destroyed dwellings and the erection of a winery took place at the beginning of the 1st century BC; in Panticapaeum some new handicraft workshops appeared during the 1st century BC exactly where some ruined public buildings had stood. As for the rural territories, some country estates, such as Soldatskaya Slobodka near Myrmekion, continued to function until the 80s BC, while most perished in the late 2nd century BC. Farms and land plots which continued to be active after Bosphorus became part of Mithridates VI's kingdom have been discovered in the *chorai* of Panticapaeum, Myrmekion, and Nymphaeum (Geroevka, Oktyabrskoe, Tchurubashskoe); some farms of that time were also found in the *chora* of Gorgippia. Usually the buildings are rectangular, two-roomed, with a courtyard and fence – for instance at Dzhemete I in the environs of Anapa (Gorgippia), where some 80 buildings of this kind have been identified (Alekseeva 1980, 24-42; Maslennikov 1998, 89).

Another type of settlement to appear at that time on the rural periphery comprises autonomous, two-room buildings, 100-200 m² in extent, with very strong defensive walls, fences, and courtyards. A third type comprises forts, mostly rectangular, known as *batareiki*, identical in plan but with a different number of towers. These are not connected with *chora politike* but belong to *chora basilike*. They appeared closer to the middle of the 1st century BC on territories classified as royal. Their erection is linked to the activities of King Asander, but most probably their appearance flows from the policy of Mithridates VI and Pharnaces II. Asander and his successors only completed the reorganisation of *chorai* started by Mithridates VI. These fortifications of the *katoikia*-type appeared only when country estates and farms near the large cities had ceased all activity (Saprykin/Maslennikov 1995, 261-82).

This enables us to conclude that the reorganisation of Bosporan *chorai*, connected with the diminution of the cities' land holdings and the enlargement of those of the king, along with the active construction of forts of the *katoikia*-type, should be seen as a display of Mithridatic policy, identical with that pursued in his ancestral domains in Asia Minor and Colchis at the beginning of the first century BC. As we have already seen, these forts did not appear until the Greek cities had been given some elements of freedom and independence, and their appearance was rather favourable for the kingdom itself. The situation in the northern Black Sea littoral was similar: stimulating their economic development and giving them some kind of limited political rights, the Pontic king initially tried to use the agrarian resources of the Greek cities. This prolonged the life of country estates in their *chorai*, but the constantly increasing requirements for food of the king's army,

engaged in a war with Rome, and the strategic aim of maintaining power over the northern Black Sea coast, demanded the formation of a qualitatively new type of agrarian settlement – the *katoikia*-type fort on royal land in close proximity to the Greek *poleis* (in order to suppress the separatism which had become evident since the unsuccessful end to the first war with Rome: McGing 1986, 109-15; Saprykin 1996, 204). It caused an intensive barter operation between the cities and the rural territories, which is reflected in the finds in both cities and agrarian sites, and led at last to the economic rise of the whole state. The inhabitants of these new settlements were mostly warriors, including local residents and incomers from Asia Minor and other lands subject to the Mithridatids. That is why the soldiers (*katoikoi*) were interested in economic links with the cities, and it caused a development of farming in their *chorai*. The find of a coin hoard on the site of Polianka in eastern Crimea – a salary to be paid to the resident *katoikoi* in 44 BC – confirms the rise of agriculture on royal land in that period (Frolova/Ireland 1999, 235).

This kind of policy on the agrarian periphery began between 80 and 63 BC, and became particularly strong from the 60s BC onwards when the political freedom of the Greeks, given earlier, had been essentially limited by royal power. After that, forts and fortresses throughout the territory of Bosphorus were seen as a tool for the royal administration to strengthen its power, as in Pontus. After the death of Mithridates VI this policy was continued by his successors. They completed the creation of a new system of relations in which rural land became mostly royal.

Returning to the Pontic Kingdom, it must be admitted that, after the defeat of Mithridates VI, Rome managed to destroy the economic and military power of Pontic monarchs, which had been based on administrative control of territory with the help of forts and royal castles on *ge basilike*. The situation worsened when the Polemonids came to power: the Romans ordered them to remove the whole system of forts and *katoikia* throughout the Pontus and later in the Bosporan territories as well. The problem was that if the basis of Mithridatic power was destroyed in Pontus by Pompey, Caesar and Augustus, in the Bosporan Kingdom it was still in place. It helped Asander to displace Pharnaces II, then to resist Mithridates of Pergamum in 45 BC, and allowed him and his wife Dynamis to build forts all over the country, having made Bosphorus a strong military power. As a result of these economic successes, the Bosporan Kingdom managed regularly to strike gold staters from 45/44 to 17/16 BC (Anokhin 1986, 76-80). In reality, the kingdom was independent of Rome, although confirming its vassalage. But Polemo I's attempt to replace this Mithridatic system in Bosphorus failed because of the severe resistance of military-economic settlers, chiefly of Maeoto-Sarmatian origin, known as 'Aspurgians' (Saprykin 1985, 73).

After Polemo I's assassination in 9/8 BC and the coming to power of Aspurgus, the Mithridatic system of land division and administration

through royal forts on royal land was strengthened again. (Bosporus once again showed its economic power by regular minting of gold coins.) The Roman Empire probably assisted him, because they realized that by keeping this system of power the local king would be strong enough to defend the north-eastern frontier against the Sarmatians. These Sarmatians were Alans, who appeared on the political stage of this steppe region close to the middle of the 1st century AD. Survival of this mode of rule in Bosporus gave Rome an opportunity to levy taxes on Bosporan kings, which is why this Mithridatic creation (with some cosmetic changes) was left to function until late antiquity.

From all that has been said above, it must be concluded that there was no trace of economic and financial crisis in Bosporus under either the Mithridatids or their immediate successors. The policy of the kings during the 1st century BC-1st century AD was directed towards the revival of the *polis* economy along with *polis* rural areas. Later on, the development of the economy was based on the farming activity of military-economic settlers – *katoikoi* – on royal lands. For that purpose the rulers built forts and other fortified sites all over the country, seeing them as a counterbalance to the *polis* communities. All these measures led the Bosporan Kingdom out of the crisis which struck it in the late 3rd – 2nd century BC.

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