

PHARNACES I OF PONTUS
AND THE KINGDOM OF PERGAMUM

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Many aspects of the history of the kings of Pontus prior to Mithridates Eupator remain unknown to modern scholars. The information we have is scant and fragmentary, and, consequently, we often rely on conjectures extracted from allusions, mostly indirect, from which sometimes very little can be inferred. Pharnaces I, the grandfather of Mithridates Eupator, is considered to have been the first of the Pontic rulers to venture towards an ambitious policy of conquest, and, as a result, the first to establish contact with Rome¹. In this paper, I propose a reconstruction of certain episodes of Pharnaces' policy which would refute the traditional view of permanent enmity between him and the kingdom of Pergamum. The mutual rivalry with Bithynia would have favoured periods of collaboration between those two kingdoms, which I shall try to trace based on some obscure passages by Justin.

The first contact between Pontus and Rome that we know of is in reference to an embassy that Pharnaces sent in 183 BC. At the very same time, embassies arrived in Rome from both Rhodes and Eumenes II, the former to protest at the bloody conquest of Sinope at the hands of Pharnaces, and the latter to try to settle some uncertain aspects of a dispute that had arisen between Eumenes and Pharnaces II (Polyb. 23. 9. 3-4; Liv. 40. 2. 6; *cf.* Str. 12. 3. 11). It seems logical, as has been argued hitherto, that the reasons for this dispute must have had as a background the territorial ambitions of Pharnaces, which would culminate in the war he waged against Bithynia and Pergamum². But it is very significant that this first Pontic mission to Rome was sent just after the end of the war between Pergamum and Bithynia in the autumn of 184 BC³. We ought to consider the possibility that

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¹ On this subject, see McGing 1986, 13-42; Ballesteros-Pastor 1996, 27-30; 442-3.

² On this war, see McShane 1964, 161-3; Will 1967, 242; Hopp 1977, 44-8; Burstein 1980; Allen 1983, 79; McGing 1986, 26-31; Habitch 1989, 328-30.

there was a relationship between this event and the above-mentioned embassies. As was noted, it is Justin who gives us a clue to this effect when, upon referring to this war, he relates a well-known trick of Hannibal, who had found refuge in the Bithynian kingdom and was general of Prusias' army. Hannibal ordered pots with snakes in them to be launched against the enemy fleet, causing confusion among "the Pontics"⁴. The term *Ponticus* appears in the ancient sources, and particularly in Justin (37. 1. 2; 40. 1. 2; Trog., *Prolog.* 32), to describe that which was related to the kingdom of Pontus, and it is unlikely that it could refer to troops other than those of Pharnaces, whose kingdom already included coastal possessions⁵. There would have been nothing surprising about Pharnaces' helping Pergamum during the war: Bithynia, a neighbouring kingdom, was the natural rival of Pontus in regard to control not only of the southern coast of the Black Sea and the Bosphorus but also of Galatia, a strategic territory. Consequently, the embassy to Rome might have had as a background the demand by Pharnaces for a reward that Eumenes refused to hand over after the war against Prusias.

This hypothesis may seem to contradict a passage from Trogus' *Prologues*, from which the opposite might be inferred — that Pharnaces was allied with Prusias during the war against Pergamum⁶. Moreover, there is the traditional interpretation given to an inscription in which the victory of Eumenes II over "Prusias, Ortiagon, the Galatians and their allies" is mentioned⁷. Regarding the former piece of evidence, it should be noted that Justin's *Epitome* does not mention the subsequent war between Pharnaces and Eumenes; thus, our confusion may be due to the shortening of the original account. Justin concludes this book of the *Epitome* with the death of Hannibal, while the *Prologues* reveal that in Trogus' work this same book must have concluded with Antiochus IV's coming to the throne. In regard to the inscription, nothing forces us to believe that the allies who are mentioned are the Pontics: it must be remembered that, although Ortiagon was a Galatian chief, he is mentioned separately from his people. Thus, the allusion could be to other Galatian tribes or, perhaps more likely, to Philip V of Macedon, who helped Bithynia in this war⁸. It should also be remembered that there was a good relationship between Prusias' kingdom and the

⁴ Iust. 32. 4. 7: *Id primum Ponticis ridiculum visum, fictilibus dimicare, qui ferro nequeant*. See further Nep., *Han.* 10. 4-11. 6; Front., *Str.* 4. 7. 10-11.

⁵ Apart from Sinope, the Pontic Kingdom had at least Amisus (Memn. 16; cf. McGing 1986, 21; Saprykin 1994, 87) and Amastris (Memn. 9. 4).

⁶ Trog., *Prolog.* 32: *in Asia bellum ab rege Eumene gestum adversus Gallum Ortiagontem, Pharmacem Ponticum et Prusian, adiuvante Prusian Hannibale Poeno*.

⁷ Segrè 1932. Habitch (1957, 1099) finds another possible allusion to Pharnaces in Nep., *Han.* 10. 2: [*Prusias*] *conciliabat ceteros reges*

⁸ On Philip: Polyb. 23. 1. 3; 23. 3. 1; Liv. 39. 46. 9; Nep., *Han.* 10. 2; Habitch 1956, 100; McShane 1964, 164; Hopp 1977, 41; Will 1967, 241.

Thracians, whom Attalus II had to fight (App., *Mith.* 6; *OGIS* 330; Hopp 1977, 96-8). The presumed co-operation between Pharnaces and the Bithynian kingdom was questioned by F. Walbank (1979), but his interpretation has not been followed by other scholars⁹.

If Pontus did, indeed, collaborate in the war against Prusias and Hannibal, why do the Roman sources not mention this in more detail? Apart from the fact that Polybius' account of this conflict has only reached us in fragments, the fact is that Pharnaces would have allied himself with Eumenes, not Rome (*cf.* Gruen 1984, vol. I, 112). Furthermore, we do not know how large a force Pharnaces employed. But above all, it has to be noted that the literary sources are not very favourable to Pharnaces. Polybius treats him with real disdain. He has many reasons to do so: first was the conquest of Sinope, the most flourishing Greek colony in Pontic Cappadocia (Polyb. 23. 9. 3-4; Liv. 40. 2. 6; Ballesteros-Pastor 1998, 57); what is more, the foundation of Pharnaceia from the *synoecism* of Cotyora and Cerasus, might have harmed Sinope, their metropolis (Str. 12. 3. 17; *cf.* Xen., *Anab.* 5. 5. 7-10). But, first of all, Pharnaces is criticised for later having undertaken expansionist enterprises which put in danger the geopolitical balance of Asia Minor, and of the Black Sea itself, and which Rome undoubtedly frowned upon. Furthermore, many later sources would have had little interest in highlighting the occasions in which Pontus had acted in favour of Roman interests as an allied kingdom. Such is the case regarding the help that Mithridates V gave to Rome in the Third Punic War, which only Appian mentions (*Mith.* 10).

The Pontic War that took place shortly after the Pontic embassy to Rome might have been in part due to Pharnaces' dissatisfaction over not seeing his territorial expectations fulfilled. After the war against Prusias, Eumenes would have had a 'corridor' from his kingdom to the Bithynian coast, to the city of Tieion, which Pharnaces laid siege to in 181 BC and which bordered Amastris, then the western limit of Pontic territory¹⁰. Thus, Pharnaces might have expected an increase in the coastal territory of his kingdom, which, as we have seen, was at the core of his programme of government.

The co-operation between Pharnaces and the kingdom of Pergamum is seen even more clearly in another passage by Justin. In the speech by Mithridates Eupator to his troops (88 BC), he specifically mentions that Pharnaces was

⁹ Walbank 1979, 254 *ad* 2. 1. 2; *cf. contra* Habitch 1957, 1099; Hopp 1977, 41; McGing 1986, 24 with note 59; Günther 1989, 245; Seibert 1993, 526, note 25. McShane (1964, 160) and Habitch (1989, 328) do not mention Pharnaces among the allies of Prusias.

¹⁰ D.S. 29. 23; *cf.* Polyb. 25. 2. 7; Hopp 1977, 43 with note 50. The conquest of Tieium by the Attalids is deduced from the terms of the final agreement from Pharnaces' War (Polyb. 25. 2. 7). For discussion, see McShane 1964, 162 with note 43; Hopp 1977, 43 with note

named as the successor to Eumenes II¹¹. It is difficult to establish precisely when the king of Pergamum took that action or the reasons for it. Niese (1903, 74, note 5) pointed out two possible moments: the Peace of Apameia (188 BC) or the peace of 180/79 BC after Pharnaces' war. The first of these dates is unlikely because of the absence of any mention of the Pontic kingdom in the agreements. The other possibility makes some sense. It is known that Attalus III was not born until 168 BC (Allen 1983, 189-94 for discussion); before his birth, Eumenes had had to convince his brother, the future Attalus II, not to accept Roman offers of help in becoming an independent king¹². The naming (perhaps unofficial rather than official) of Pharnaces as successor might have been a ploy by Eumenes to dissuade the members of his family from any attempt to take the throne against his will. Pontus was at that moment a valuable ally: it maintained submissive relationships with Roman power, since its *amicitia* was instituted at the end of the war and would continue into the rule of Mithridates IV, who was also an ally of Pergamum (*IOSPE* P, 402; *OGIS*, 375; Polyb. 33. 12. 1). However, at the same time, Pontus shared with Pergamum the suspicion of an ever-present threat from Bithynia, which had its eye on taking over the entire southern coast of the Propontis¹³, all the more so when, about 178-177 BC, Pharnaces II returned to his policy of rivalry with Pergamum when he married Apame, Perseus' sister (Liv. 42. 12. 2; App., *Mac.* 11; *Mith.* 2; Hopp 1977, 43-4). Rome appears not to have taken a special interest in the fact that the excessive strengthening of the kingdom of Pergamum could substantially alter the balance of power in Asia, and would give a clearly favourable treatment to the Bithynians to the detriment of Eumenes, who felt ill-treated by his former protectors (Will 1967, 245; Hopp 1977, 56-8; Burstein 1980). Perhaps Eumenes proposed a union with Pontus as a means of getting out of an uncomfortable international situation. Precisely for this reason, it is difficult to accept another hypothesis by Niese, who argues that the decision to make Pharnaces Eumenes' successor would have been made directly by Rome (Niese 1903, 74 note 5; cf.

¹¹ Iust. 38. 6. 1: *Sic et avum suum Pharnacem per cognitionum arbitria succidaneum regi Pergameno Eumeni datum*. Seel (1972a, 418), who follows his own edition (Teubner, Stuttgart 1972², 261), translates this phrase as: "mit Hilfe willkürlicher Rechtssprüche dem König von Pergamon, Eumenes, als Nachfolger aufgenötigt worden"; Nisard's edition (Didot, Paris 1841, 531-2) transcribes *cognationum*, and translates it thus: "choisi par un tribunal de famille pour succéder à Eumène". In either case, the naming of Pharnaces as his successor would be obvious (cf. Niese 1903, 74, note 5). The problem with Seel's translation is that it has a negative tone, while the tone of Mithridates' speech is precisely the opposite, that is, he wants to demonstrate the legitimate rights of Pontus over the province of Asia as well as the treachery of the Romans.

¹² Polyb. 30. 1. 7-30; 30. 2. 8; 33. 18. 1-4; cf. Plu., *Mor.* 184b, 489e-f. Against this possible rivalry between the brothers, see Leschhorn 1996, 92-5.

¹³ The passage between the Aegean and the Black Sea is an ever-present question: in the war against Pharnaces, Eumenes proceeded to close off the Black Sea.

contra Gruen 1984, Vol. II, 554, note 109). Rome, as we have seen, turned its back on the powerful Attalid kingdom and used the dynastic troubles as a means of maintaining its position as arbiter among the kingdoms of the East (Badian 1958, 111). The union between Pontus and Pergamum would undoubtedly have meant the creation of a great power in Anatolia, which would have kept a suffocating grip on Bithynia and Galatia, as well as an important presence on the Black Sea coast. In any case, although the recognition of Attalus III as successor to the throne of Pergamum would have caused Pharnaces' aspirations to disappear, their memory would have been perpetuated in pro-Pontic sources, which represent the taking of Asia by Mithridates Eupator more as a reconquest of what belonged to him than an appropriation of a foreign territory¹⁴.

Pharnaces was, then, the first Pontic king to undertake a foreign policy of great magnitude and he made his kingdom an important power within the framework not only of Anatolia but also of the Black Sea itself. Thus, the expansion of his interests towards the northern Black Sea, seen in the treaty with Chersonesos (*IOSPE* I², 402), could have been recorded by subsequent Roman historians as an actual annexation of the Cimmerian Bosphorus, which would later be reflected in the time of Mithridates Eupator as part of the ancestral territory of the Pontic crown (Iust. 37. 1. 9; App., *Mith.* 55. 55. 107; *BC* 1. 76; *Vell.* 2. 22. 3). The union between Pontus and Pergamum would have been a big step forward in the formation of a great Pontic state. Although Pharnaces failed in his attempts, Mithridates Eupator was to return to the old aspirations of his grandfather, which served in part as a justification for his policy of conquest.

ABBREVIATIONS

- AJAH* *American Journal of Ancient History*
CAH *Cambridge Ancient History*
IOSPE *Inscriptiones Antiquae Orae Septentrionalis Ponti Euxini Graecae et Latinae*,
ed. B. Latyshev
OGIS *Orientalis Graeci Inscriptiones Selectae*, ed. W. Dittenberger

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¹⁴ Iust. 37. 1. 9: *proximas regni Attalici opes aut veteres Lydiae Ioniaeque audierint, quas non expugnatum, eant, sed possessum*; cf. 38. 5. 3; Saprykin 1994.

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