



MITHRIDATES VI AND THE PONTIC KINGDOM

*Edited by
Jakob Munk Hojte*

MITHRIDATES VI
AND
THE PONTIC KINGDOM

BLACK SEA STUDIES

9

THE DANISH NATIONAL RESEARCH FOUNDATION'S
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Introduction

Jakob Munk Højte

Interest in Mithridates VI Eupator, both scholarly and popular, has a long history. Renowned for toxicology, multilingualism and not least for his endurance in the long struggle with Rome, which eventually led to his downfall, Mithridates VI is one of the few personalities of antiquity that has been the main character in both poetry, historical fiction, plays and operas as well as in an abundance of scholarly literature.

11-13 January 2007, the Danish National Research Foundation's Centre for Black Sea Studies hosted an international conference on *Mithridates VI and the Pontic Kingdom* at the University of Aarhus with the aim of presenting the current state of research in the field and ongoing projects in the region.

The perception of Mithridates VI has changed dramatically over the past centuries. In the initial chapter, L. Summerer takes a historiographical tour from Late Antiquity to the present, which shows that every age has shaped the image of Mithridates to fit contemporary ideological currents. To Th. Mommsen (1854-1856) and Th. Reinach (1895) writing in the later half of the 19th century, Mithridates was in accordance with prevailing "orientalist" views the epitome of a cruel oriental despot, an Ottoman sultan as they styled him, and an opponent of Western civilization. In more recent scholarship the pendulum has swung more in favour of Mithridates, who can now be pictured as a philhellene king defending the Greeks against Roman aggression. This reflects the more critical view of Roman imperialism in the post-colonial world. Interestingly the body of evidence on which these assumptions were made has remained largely unchanged. One of the basic problems in the discussion is the lack of local sources to balance our view. The victor writes the history and any study of the Pontic Kingdom must to a large extent rely on later Roman authors writing for a Roman audience, who have predominantly pro-Roman views although not without some admiration for Mithridates. Once defeated there was no need for diminishing the opponent. This bias as well as the flavouring of current ideological concepts must be taken into careful consideration in order to give a more accurate account of Mithridates VI and the Pontic Kingdom.

Next Chr. Marek offers an overview of the question of Hellenisation and Romanisation in northern Anatolia. Different scholars have presented surprisingly conflicting views on this matter. Some maintain, like the late Ju. Vinogradov (1997, 66), that Pontos was thoroughly Hellenised into the deepest valley through a conscious royal policy, while others rather see a conglomerate of

different ethnic groups held together by a basically Persian but very adaptable royal ideology (cf. Mitchell 2002). As this question deeply influences the way we view the Pontic Kingdom, a fundamental discussion of the premises for reaching these widely different conclusions is badly needed. What are the parameters of Hellenisation and Romanisation, and by which markers should we measure cultural change? Marek looks at markers such as language, onomastics, myth, calendars, and cultural and political institutions, which all show that by the Roman Imperial period, Pontos had become an integral part of the Graeco-Roman world. For the Hellenistic period the question is much more difficult because of the lack of sources apart for evidence concerning the king and the court.

Central to the discussion of Mithridates VI is of course the struggle with Rome. J.M. Madsen and B.C. McGing approach the question of who was responsible for the outbreak of the conflict between Pontos and Rome. Was Mithridates VI the hateful aggressor as the ancient sources suggest or an innocent victim of Roman imperialism? Like any other Hellenistic king, Mithridates had an ambition to enlarge his domain. He had conquered the northern and eastern regions of the Black Sea but in Asia Minor he faced Roman interests. The lengthy prelude to the war of Pontic expansion followed by Roman demands of withdrawal and compliance or the lack thereof by Mithridates shows the complex diplomatic situation of the time. How far he could go, short of outright military challenge to Rome, was difficult to gauge, but as McGing maintains, Mithridates clearly tried to find out. Madsen adds further factors. There were Roman senators eager to further their careers and the acts of the Roman commission in 89 BC had crucial impact on events. In addition there were expectations among the Greeks of Asia for a saviour king to relieve them from the Roman yoke, and Mithridates was a perfect cast for the role. Perhaps both sides were simply drawn into inevitable collision.

M.J. Olbrycht points out an often overlooked condition for the expansionist policies, namely the support of the Parthian Empire, which under Mithridates II the Great extended its sphere of influence to the borders of Pontos. Without his eastern flank covered and the financial support of the Arsakid king, Mithridates VI could not have embarked on his conquest of Asia Minor and the war with Rome, and the sudden death of Mithridates II in 87 BC followed by internal strife in Parthia may have been a contributing factor to the Pontic defeat.

In the cause of the Mithridatic Wars much attention was paid to the propagandistic struggle between Mithridates and Rome, since it was crucial to win the support of the Greek cities. Ilium held prime importance in this struggle because of the mythic past of the city. L. Ballesteros-Pastor unfolds the reports of the fighting over the city and the political implications of the portents of the city goddess Athena Ilias. Ballesteros-Pastor also draws attention to King Juba II of Mauretania as one of the primary sources for the history of Mithridates VI that may have been used later by Appianos and Pompeius Trogus. Juba was well-informed about Pontic affairs, not least because of his marriage with the

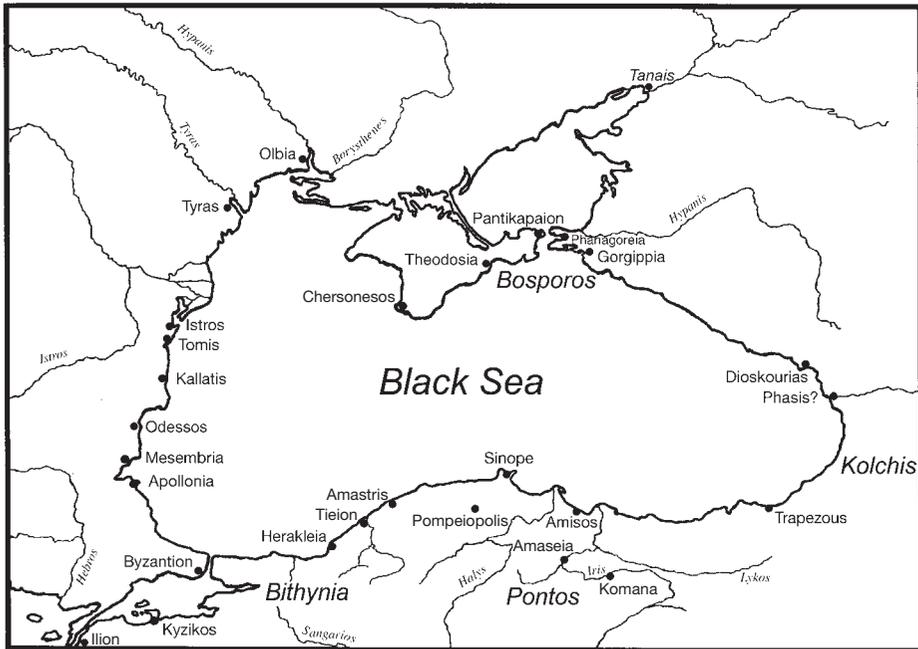


Fig. 1. The Black Sea region.

daughter of Archelaos of Kappadokia, who was a descendant of Mithridates' general of the same name.

Compared to our knowledge of Mithridates VI, sources to the earlier history of the Pontic Kingdom are virtually absent and even the succession of kings and their regnal years are still a matter of debate, which cannot be settled on the basis of the present evidence. O.L. Gabelko takes a fresh look at one of the sources for the dynastic history, the 9th century AD *Chronography* of George Synkellos, which has generally been disregarded because of its seeming inconsistencies. Gabelko suggests that the confusion about the number of kings in the Pontic and Bithynian royal houses results from the inclusion of two little known descendants of Mithridates VI, Orsobaris and Orodaltis, who apparently reigned as queens in Kios, the original seat of the Mithridatid house. He further notes that the starting points of the eras of the kingdoms of Asia Minor coincide with intermarriages with the Seleukid royal family, thus emphasising the importance of recognition by the Seleukid kings.

Another little known area concerns the administrative organisation of the Pontic Kingdom. How was control exercised over the territory? Højte suggests that the minting places of the civic bronze coinage may reflect the administrative division of the kingdom into *strategiai*, similar to the situation in the Kappadokian Kingdom as described by Strabon. Earlier these coins have been interpreted as an attempt to further *polis* structures and to foster local pride.

But several of the localities mentioned on the coins can hardly be described as cities. Rather the coins seem to refer to the fortresses that were the seats of the regional governors, and the coins were probably used to pay the local garrison.

The reign of Mithridates VI saw other innovations in the coin system of the Pontic Kingdom. First of all coins in other metals than gold and silver were introduced, and as a novelty in the Greek world coins were struck in brass and pure copper. T.N. Smekalova traces the spread of these coinages in the areas under Mithridatic influence in Asia Minor and the Bosporos. Striking coins in brass required access to zinc and knowledge of the difficult process of making the alloy, which made them difficult to falsify. This offered the possibility of assigning higher values to the coins in a strained financial situation. Only half a century later did brass and pure copper coins come into regular use again with the coin reform of Augustus.

F. de Callatay in his contribution for the first time catalogues the coins struck by the predecessors of Mithridates VI from the first issues under Mithridates III to Mithridates V. The study shows a surprisingly limited coin production in Pontos before Mithridates VI (86 known specimens). The striking of tetradrachms only equalled an estimated 34,000 drachms a year in the period 220-150 BC and under Mithridates V production nearly ceased. This makes the achievements of Mithridates VI even more impressive as he multiplied the rate of striking ten or twenty times. In addition he introduced the most precise dating of the coins in any coinage known in antiquity.

Royal self-representation is discussed by P.-A. Kreuz and J.M. Højte. Kreuz raises the question of how the kingship of Mithridates was perceived by the Greeks. Unfortunately the literary and archaeological record has left only few glimpses of how the king wanted to represent himself. The only really useful example is the monument in honour of Mithridates in the sanctuary of the Kabeiroi on Delos erected in 102/101 BC. Here Mithridates is surrounded by a portrait gallery of the king's friends and allies, which included other Hellenistic kings, Persian officials and Greek courtiers. The monument gave the visitor an impression of a resourceful king with international recognition and prestige fundamental to Hellenistic kingship.

J.M. Højte tries to establish a series of portraits attributable to Mithridates VI among the diverse group of late Hellenistic ruler portraits. A new addition to the list is a recently found head from Pantikapaion. The use of Alexander's image on the coins is also reflected in the sculpted portraits, but Herakles also played a certain role. Unfortunately we have little knowledge about how Mithridates represented himself to his subjects in Pontos, as the portraits have been found in Greek cities outside the realm.

One of the main problems in studying Pontos is the limited number of archaeological excavations and surveys carried out in northern Turkey and even the known monuments have hitherto not been studied to their full potential. One of the very few monuments of the Pontic Kings that has survived

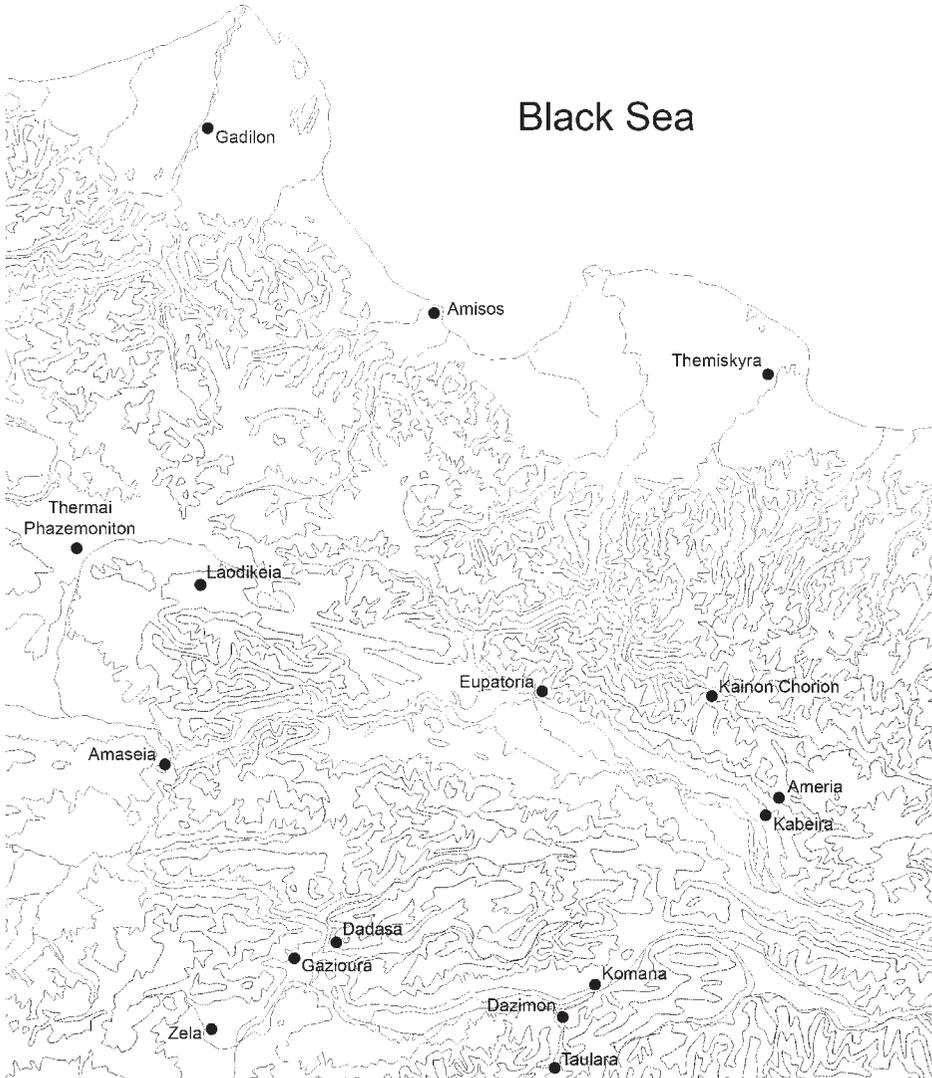


Fig. 2. Pontos.

until the present are the five royal tombs in Amaseia, the first capital of the Kingdom. Although visible since antiquity they have until recently never been the subject of thorough investigation. In 2002, R. Fleischer initiated a project of measuring and reconstructing the tombs. Despite the loss of nearly all the added architectural details, it has been possible to reconstruct the tomb facades in great detail based on the cuttings for clamps in the rock. Furthermore the chronological sequence of the tombs has been firmly established. Contrary

to the common opinion that the kingdom became increasingly Hellenised over time, the tomb architecture shows the opposite tendency, as the earliest tomb most closely resemble Greek models, while the later tombs with archivolts instead of a columns and pediment may reflect local traditions instead. Fleischer ascribes the tombs to the five earliest kings of Pontos, Mithridates I to Pharnakes I, the latest tomb being unfinished when Pharnakes I moved the capital to the newly conquered city Sinope. This view is challenged in the following chapter by J.M. Højte, who suggests that Mithridates VI may also have been interred in Amaseia. After the death of Mithridates VI in 63 BC, Pompeius took the unusual step of giving his adversary a state funeral. A surprising honour for one of the strongest opponents Rome had faced. The reason was probably that Pompeius wanted to imitate Alexander the Great, who likewise had the body of his adversary buried in the tombs of his forefathers. In analogy with the rock-cut tombs of the Persian king outside Persepolis, the graves in Amaseia would have been the perfect setting for the funeral.

Temple states were of central importance to the religious life in the Pontic Kingdom, where three such religious communities are known. E. Sökmen traces the background for this peculiar type of states and discusses their function within the Mithridatic Kingdom and later in the Roman province. In 2004, D.B. Erciyas initiated a survey project at the site of the largest of the temple states in Pontos, Komana Pontike, in order to shed light on the settlement history of the site and its territory. Geophysical investigations were also carried out on the hill Hamamtepe generally considered to be the site of the temple to determine the extent of the site and to identify structures not visible on the ground. Although little Hellenistic material has been found so far, the project holds great potential for extending our knowledge of the site and its organisation in the Mithridatic period.

S.Ju. Saprykin focuses on the political aspects of the use of religion in Pontos, particularly the royal propaganda. It is characteristic that the gods favoured by the kings often were syncretistic with Greek, Anatolian and Persian elements, which could be perceived differently by the various ethnic groups living in the kingdom. In Saprykin's opinion the Greek element was always the strongest with Zeus as the protector of the royal house. Although the Mithridatids were of Persian descent there is little evidence for Persian religious beliefs and practices apart from the worship of Anaitis in Zela. However, much of the source material dates to the Roman period and the contemporary sources are mostly coins, which primarily had a Greek audience.

Whereas there has been a dearth of excavations in Pontos, the situation is very different in the Bosporan region. Here many excavations have detected settlement changes and construction of fortresses around the turn of the second and first century BC when Bosporos was incorporated in the Pontic Kingdom. It seems that this reorientation of the infrastructure and the rising importance of fortified sites in many ways reflect the way Pontos was

organised. One of these sites, the fortified settlement Kuru Baş east of Theodosia on the border of the Bosporan territory, is discussed by A.V. Gavrilov. Here it appears that a Mithridatic garrison was placed to control the land route from Theodosia to the Crimean Mountains. Of particular interest is the large number of coins found at the site spanning the period from the mid-second to the late first century BC.

E.A. Molev discusses the status of Bosporos within the framework of the Pontic Empire. He argues that Bosporos was fully incorporated into the kingdom as a province ruled by a satrap. From the outbreak of the First Mithridatic War, this position was held by sons of Mithridates, which underlines the close relationship between the two parts of the kingdom.

A. Mastrocinque in his contribution makes the bold suggestion that the mechanism found in the Antikythera shipwreck is in fact the *sphaera* of Billaros mentioned by Strabon as taken by Lucullus from Sinope. If correct this could imply that the cargo of the ship including the many statues may have come from the southern shore of the Black Sea as well.

In the contributions old questions concerning Mithridates VI Eupator and the Pontic Kingdom have been reconsidered and new questions have been raised. It is the hope that the present volume will encourage further research and that new projects in the region will open new possibilities and approaches. More archaeological investigations in Pontos are urgently needed to draw a more complete picture of this important late Hellenistic kingdom.

Finally, the Centre wishes to thank Robin Wildfang and Stacey Cozart for linguistically revising the manuscripts.

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The Search for Mithridates. Reception of Mithridates VI between the 15th and the 20th Centuries

Lâtife Summerer

*“dont les seuls défaites ont fait presque
toute la gloire de trois plus grands
capitaines de la république”*

Jean Racine, *Mithridate*

Introduction

“Il n’y a guère de nom plus connu que celui de Mithridate”. This is a quotation from the preface of Jean Racine’s tragedy *Mithridate*, which was published in 1673. Today, more than three hundred years later nobody would agree with this. Familiarity with Mithridates seems to have decreased enormously since the 17th century. But what was the reason for the high level of recognition enjoyed by the last Pontic king at this time? What knowledge of Mithridates did people living in Europe in the middle of the 17th century have? How did they perceive and interpret the historical facts found in the ancient written sources? What opinions did Mithridates elicit in scholarly and popular thinking? Through which imagined constructs was knowledge of the last Pontic king generated?

This paper deals with the reception of Mithridates between the 15th and the 20th centuries. The last Pontic king was the subject of scientific works as well as a source of inspiration in popular literature and opera over these centuries. My aim is to show how certain historical facts involving Mithridates were used, distorted, overlooked and finally constructed into positive and negative images of him. In order to understand the changes that occurred over time it is necessary to focus our attention not on Mithridates, but on those who have interpreted him.¹

Mithridates as the epitome of multilingualism

Throughout the centuries, curious legends about the extraordinary intellectual achievement of the last Pontic king have been told. Mithridates supposedly had a prodigious memory. Pliny the Elder and other Roman historians report that he could speak the languages of all the twentytwo nations he ruled.² Since the 16th century, the documentation and description of the multitude and diversity of languages have been connected with the name “Mithridates”. In 1555, the Swiss scholar Conrad Gesner published a linguistic encyclopaedia with the title *Mithridates sive de differentiis linguarum* (about the differentiation of languages). Gesner may also have used Mithridates’ name, because the Pontic king was an opponent of the Roman Empire. The protestant Gesner was as much opposed to universal Roman Catholic power as Mithridates was opposed to Rome’s hegemony.³ Later, other linguists continued to associate increased knowledge of the languages of the world with the multilingualism of Mithridates. Johann Christoff Adelung, a German philologist and grammarian of the early nineteenth century, for instance, entitled his multivolume encyclopaedic work *Mithridates, oder allgemeine Sprachenkunde*.⁴ The most recent comparative linguistic work by Jürgen Trabant, published in 2003, again bears the name of the last Pontic king.⁵

Mithridates as the epitome of botany and antidotes

Throughout Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, Mithridates was associated with botany and pharmacology through the reading of Pliny, Justinus and other ancient authors. Some plants still bear his name, such as *mithridatia* and *eupatoria*.⁶ Mithridates supposedly sought to harden himself against poisoning by taking increasing sub-lethal doses of those poisons of which he knew until he was able to tolerate lethal doses.⁷ Out of fear of being poisoned by one of his many enemies, Mithridates fashioned a universal antidote, *antidotum mithridaticum*, which consisted of dozens of ingredients. After Mithridates was defeated by Pompeius, a notebook was found in the king’s archives with a prescription for an antidote, which, modestly, consisted of two dried walnuts, two figs, and twenty leaves of rue pounded together with a pinch of salt (Plin. *HN* 25.7). Among other documents were detailed accounts of medical plants, together with specimens and notes on each, all of which Pompeius ordered to be translated into Latin. Pliny (*HN* 29.25) describes a Mithridatic antidote with fifty-four ingredients and remarks that he is sceptical of theriacs such as *mithridaticum* with their countless ingredients.⁸ The practice of protecting oneself against poison by gradually self-administering non-lethal doses, aiming to develop immunity, is called mithridatizing.⁹ The pharmacological wisdom of Mithridates remained in the knowledge of humanity for centuries. For instance, it turns up in the poem *Terence, This is Stupid Stuff* by the English poet and classical scholar Alfred Edward Houseman in his cycle

of poems *A Shropshire Lad*,¹⁰ and in a poem by Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Mithridates Analysis*.¹¹

The death of Mithridates in popular literature

Giovanni Boccaccio's *De casibus virorum illustrium*

It was in the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries that printed editions of the ancient writers became available in their original languages and in translation. As the ancient sources became familiar, interest in history and historical personalities grew. Writers like Dante and Boccaccio transferred ancient history into their own worlds of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Among many other important works Giovanni Boccaccio wrote the moralistic biographical book *De casibus virorum illustrium*



Fig. 1. "Mithridate VI assiégé et mort de Mithridate VI" by Boccaccio. Book illustration from *De casibus illustrium virorum* (1355-1360), French translation Laurent de Premierfait. France, 15th century AD (France, Lyon).



Fig. 2. "Mithridate VI assiégé et mort de Mithridate VI" by Boccaccio. Book illustration from *De casibus illustrium virorum* (1355-1360), French translation Laurent de Premierfait. France, 15th century AD (France, Lyon).

between 1357 and 1363, which tells of the fall of famous men in antiquity. This biography includes Mithridates side-by-side with Pompeius Magnus, Caesar, Marcus Antonius and Kleopatra. The French translation of Boccaccio's work by Laurent de Premierfait, first published in 1400 contains richly illustrated pages, four of them portraying the death of Mithridates.¹² The first shows the hopeless situation of Mithridates (Fig. 1). His castle is already surrounded by numerous Roman soldiers; the king portrayed as a beardless young man waits outside the castle for his execution, kneeling with clasped hands while his slave strikes him with his sword. In the