

Bosporos and Chersonesos in the 4th-2nd Centuries BC

Evgenij A. Molev



The political relations between the two leading states in Taurica – Bosporos and Chersonesos – have for long attracted the attention of scholars. However, the conclusions reached about the nature of the relations during various historical periods differ widely due to the almost complete lack of evidence from the literary sources. This paper will consider once again the character of the political contacts between Bosporos and Chersonesos during the Hellenistic period, beginning from the moment when “Crimea was in fact divided”¹ between these two states until they both became subjects to the Kingdom of Pontos.

Only one written document contains direct evidence about the political contacts between Bosporos and Chersonesos during this period – namely the Chersonesean decree in honour of Syriskos of the 3rd century BC (*IOSPE* I², 344). Nevertheless, indirect information can be obtained from epigraphy, numismatics and material from archaeological excavations. On the basis of this, a number of researchers have come to the conclusion that the first contact concerned the struggle for Theodosia where they opposed each other. In favour of this view, the following arguments have been put forward:

- 1) Theodosia, Phanagoria, and Chersonesos borrowing the coin types of Herakleia suggests that some sort of alliance existed between these cities.²
- 2) Theodosia issuing coins with Chersonesean types at the Chersonesean mint, may indicate open participation of Chersonesos in the war against Bosporos.³ This hypothesis, put forward by M.I. Zolotarev, has been supported by S.Ju. Saprykin and Ju.G. Vinogradov.⁴
- 3) The majority of Herakleian imports in Bosporos belong to the second half of the 4th century BC, i.e. only after the war between Herakleia and Bosporos had ended.⁵
- 4) The possibility that Bosporos attempted to advance further to the west towards Chersonesos after the capture of Theodosia.

Town	Number of stamps	400-370 BC	370-300 BC
Pantikapaion	357	86	264
Myrmekion	73	18	52
Nymphaion	39	9	27
Phanagoria	60	19	40
<i>Bosporos total</i>	529	132	383
Theodosia	74	19	55
Chersonesos	235	109	12

Fig. 1. Herakleian amphora stamps found in the northern Black Sea region. Based on IOSPE III and Saprykin 1986, 90-91.

It should be noted that the final argument lacks support in the sources. All the subsequent (and indeed previous) activities of the Spartokids strongly suggest that their main political interests were linked to the East – the territory of Sindike. It was here that Satyros I commenced his aggressive moves against Phanagoria and the Sindikos Limen at the end of the 5th century BC, and if we accept the similarity of the coin types of the two cities being the result of an alliance, it was precisely as a response to this aggression that Theodosia and Herakleia must have proceeded against Bosporos. Hence, the advance of Bosporos against Theodosia was not necessarily considered a hostile act in Chersonesos.

Mints borrowing coin types of other cities can be evidence of a political union, but should not be considered conclusive if unsupported by other evidence. Economic ties may have been of greater importance. Similarity of coin types and denominations offered the possibility of a stable and long-term exchange of goods that, in turn, could indeed lead to political agreements. Nevertheless the economy was always the primary factor. And the economic ties between Herakleia and Theodosia, Phanagoria and Chersonesos were undoubtedly strong, if we judge by the evidence of ceramic containers. With Pantikapaion, the ties seem to have been stronger still. A study of the data from the corpus of ceramic stamps in IOSPE III and the information on the Herakleian stamps from the Museum of Chersonesos, re-examined by Saprykin,⁶ demonstrates this (Fig. 1).

Thus, between 400-370 BC (i.e. the period of the wars for Theodosia) the export from Herakleia to Pantikapaion alone considerably exceeded that to Theodosia, and even exceeded the export to Chersonesos. If one takes into account the archaeological evidence from excavations in all of the Bosporan cities, the total exports of Herakleia to the cities of Bosporos clearly exceeded that to Chersonesos. In Kytiaia for example, the peak in the import of

Herakleian stamped amphorae falls in the period 386-376 BC, when the level was nine times the average for the entire period of stamping (according to V.I. Kac's calculations). Even more telling is the predominance of Herakleian stamps of the first third of the 4th century BC at the settlement of Elizavetovskoe.⁷ The passage of Herakleian merchant ships through the Kimmerian Bosporos could hardly have proceeded unchecked by the Bosporan state if the protection of its economic interests were threatened.

Considering this evidence, the supposed anti-Bosporan alliance whose existence has been deduced from the similarity of the coin types and the corresponding economic interests of the allies, does not seem to be well founded. The possibility that such an alliance existed, is furthermore contradicted by the gravestones of a Chersonesean (CIRB 173, 195) and a Theodosian (CIRB 231) citizen found in the necropolis of Pantikapaion, as well as by the gravestone of a Herakleiot found in the necropolis of Nymphaion (CIRB 923). All these are dated to the first half of the 4th century BC, i.e. to the period when these cities supposedly were at war with Bosporos. In my opinion, it seems more probable that each of the participants of the war pursued their own political objectives. Herakleia, for one, came to the assistance of Theodosia not by virtue of an alliance, but rather at its request, due to the increasing threats from the Bosporan and Athenian alliance precisely when Herakleia itself was making approaches to Persia.⁸

The possibility that Chersonesos likewise took part in the war is more difficult to assess. The issue of a series of Theodosian coins at the Chersonesean mint seems to be a weighty argument in favour of Chersonesos supporting its *metropolis*. However, if one takes into account the relatively late establishment of the mint at Chersonesos (about 390-380 BC⁹), when Theodosia had already issued four series of coins,¹⁰ the argument becomes less convincing. Moreover, the series of Theodosian coins found in Chersonesos dated 390-380 BC also contradicts the notion, since it reveals the existence of close economic ties between Theodosia and Chersonesos during this period.¹¹

Thus no evidence – even indirect – available to us indicates the open participation of Chersonesos in the struggle for Theodosia, apart perhaps from the assumption that Chersonesos being closely connected with its *metropolis* may have taken part in the war. But if so, Chersonesos, in my opinion, probably acted merely as an operational base for the activities of the Herakleian fleet against Bosporos.

As mentioned above, the political contacts between Chersonesos and Bosporos in the 3rd century BC are hinted at by the Chersonesean decree in honour of Syriskos. According to this text, Chersonesos for some time maintained friendly relations with “the cities and kings” (lines 17-19). Since the preamble of the decree (line 5) specifically mentions the Bosporan kings, we must assume that the friendly relations included them as well. Use of the

plural suggests that several representatives of the Spartokid dynasty were concerned; possibly all the kings from Eumelos to Spartokos III,¹² or perhaps only Pairisades II and Satyros III. The last named is known from a graffito on a fresco from Nymphaion.¹³ Such facts as the dating of the decree to the second half of the 3rd century BC and the high esteem in which the efforts of Syriskos were held by his fellow-citizens implies only Pairisades II and Satyros III. Such esteem undoubtedly proves that to Chersonesos the friendly relations mentioned in the decree were important precisely in the period of its issue. In addition, the policy of Eumelos on the shores of the Euxine, which was aimed at uniting all the cities and tribes of the region under his power, seems unlikely to have been favouring a rapprochement between Chersonesos and Bosporos. Chersonesos at this time reached the peak of its economic power, and its potential for grain exports, according to some calculations,¹⁴ became comparable to that of Bosporos. It is unlikely, therefore, that Chersonesos by mere chance should have been left unmentioned among the cities to which the benefits of Eumelos were extended.

The situation was quite different in the second half of the 3rd century BC. By the 270s BC, the settlements situated in the Chersonesean *chora* had already ceased to exist due to barbarian attacks.¹⁵ The main adversaries of Chersonesos were the Scythians. Since the Scythians and Bosporos were allied,¹⁶ it is not surprising that Chersonesos tried to approach the latter. The decree in honour of Syriskos shows that friendly relations were established. However, it remains unclear, what precisely was concealed behind the formula of the decree. Probably Bosporos managed, by way of diplomacy, to convince their allies to suspend the attacks on Chersonesos, but they were not able to solve the problem permanently.

As a result, the Chersoneseans appealed for help from the adversaries of Bosporos – the Sarmatians. This we are told by the Greek writer Polyainos in his narrative about the Sarmatian Queen Amage (*Strat.* 8.56). The story is of such legendary character that researchers have been at a loss even to agree upon its date. Most probably though, the events described by Polyainos belong to a period not later than the end of the 3rd century BC. According to his account, the Chersoneseans appealed to the Sarmatian Queen Amage who “was famed throughout the whole of Scythia” with the request to accept them as one of her allies. The only trustworthy element in this story is possibly the Chersonesean request for help from the Sarmatians and the help offered by the latter. During the following century Chersonesos was unable to find such protection, and its position became still more precarious. Hence, its relations with Bosporos changed correspondingly.

The available sources for the political contacts between Bosporos and Chersonesos at the end of the 3rd century and in 2nd century BC contain scarcely any information of value. We may gain a glimpse of the character of their relations from the agreement of 179 BC between the Pontic king,

Pharnakos, and his adversaries (Polyb. 25.2.1-14). As is well known, two representatives from the northern Black Sea region are mentioned in the treaty: Chersonesos and the Sarmatian King Gatalos. The inclusion of Chersonesos into the treaty is easily explicable. The city already had a separate treaty of friendship and mutual assistance with Pharnakos, apparently concluded about 180 BC, i.e. during the war between Pharnakos and Eumenes.¹⁷ Some years ago K.M. Kolobova quite rightly posited that it was the Chersoneseans who were the initiators of this treaty.¹⁸ This fact would suggest that the *polis*, which not long before had set its hopes upon the aid of Bosporos to protect its independence, could no longer expect such aid. The fact that Chersonesos appealed for help to Pontos indicates that the Chersoneseans were well acquainted with the political situation in Asia Minor. Pharnakos was then at the peak of his success. This was known in Bosporos as well, but Pairisades III was not on friendly terms with Pontos since from the beginning of the 3rd century BC Bosporos had maintained fairly strong economic ties with Sinope which had now been captured by the Pontic king. Moreover, the main adversary of Sinope in the Black Sea trade – Herakleia – also proved to be in the camp of the supporters of the Pontic king and was included in the treaty referred to by Polybios. All this suggests that the relations between Bosporos and Chersonesos were becoming cooler during that period.

Their relations were also affected by the position of King Gatalos. His kingdom was most probably situated in the northern Caucasus and consisted of a Maeoto-Sarmatian union.¹⁹ Since the second half of the 3rd century BC, the relations between Bosporos and this union were becoming more and more strained. In the opinion of most scholars, King Gatalos was included in the Treaty of Pharnakos as a party friendly to Pontos.²⁰ Since there is no evidence that he took part on the side of Pontos in the war in Asia Minor, we may suppose that his task was to contain the potential opponent, Bosporos, which was closer to Gatalos' own possessions. They had reacted against the capture of Sinope by the King of Pontos. The relations between Bosporos and Pontos may have been inimical even without that cause. In any case, the alliance between Chersonesos and Pontos and possibly with King Gatalos, made the former *polis* a potential adversary of Bosporos that relied on the support of the Scythians. From this point and until their subjugation by Mithridates Eupator, Chersonesos and Bosporos maintained neutral relations at best, and limited themselves mainly to unofficial trade contacts. The participation of Chersonesos in the suppression of the revolt of Saumakos may suggest an even worse situation.

Thus, in the 3rd and 2nd centuries BC the relations between Bosporos and Chersonesos varied from inimical to friendly and *vice versa*. This was to a great extent caused by the changes in the ethno-political situation in the region, the difference between the political systems of either state and the directions of their economic development.

Notes

1. Domanskij & Frolov 1995, 86.
2. Minns 1913, 559; Maksimova 1956, 164; Saprykin 1986, 74-82.
3. Zolotarev 1984, 89-92.
4. Saprykin 1986, 79; Vinogradov 1995, 19.
5. Saprykin 1986, 83-89.
6. Saprykin 1986, 90-91.
7. Brašinskij 1980, 39-41; 1984, 150-152; Garlan 1982, 4.
8. Burstein 1976, 43-59; Šelov-Kovedjaev 1984, 118; Zavojskij 2000, 265.
9. Anochin 1977, 18-20; Turovskij 1997, 12-13.
10. Anochin 1986, 15-19.
11. Kovalenko 1999, 122.
12. Turovskij 1995, 153.
13. On this fresco, see Grač 1984, 81-88; 1987, 87-96.
14. Vinogradov & Ščeglov 1990, 332.
15. Ščeglov 1978, 128; Puzdrovskij 1995, 142.
16. Vinogradov 1987, 85; Molev 1994, 36.
17. Molev 1995, 17-18.
18. Kolobova 1949, 31.
19. Polin 1992, 92-94; Marčenko 1996, 124-126; Molev 1998, 37-39.
20. Lomouri 1979, 54; Pal'ceva 1979, 75; Saprykin 1979, 56.

Bibliography

- Anochin, V.A. 1977. *Monetnoe delo Chersonesa (IV v. do n.e. – XII v. n.e.)*. Kiev.
- Anochin, V.A. 1986. *Monetnoe delo Bospora*. Kiev.
- Brašinskij, J.B. 1980. *Grečeskij keramičeskij import na Nižnem Donu v V – III vv. do n.e.* Leningrad.
- Brašinskij, J.B. 1984. *Metody issledovanija antičnoj trgovli*. Leningrad.
- Burstein, S.M. 1976. *Outpost of Hellenism. The Emergence of Heraclea on the Black Sea*. Berkeley-Los Angeles-London.
- Domanskij, Ja.V. & E.D. Frolov 1995. Osnovnye etapy razvitija mežpolisnyh otnošenij v Pričernomor'e v dorimskuju epochu (VIII – I vv. do n.e.), in: *Antičnye polisy i mestnoe naselenie Pričernomor'ja*. Sevastopol', 78-99.
- Garlan, Y. 1982. Elisavetovskoe, un emporion grec sur le Bas-Don, *DialHistAnc* 8, 145-152.
- Golubcova, E.S. (ed.) 1990. *Ellinism: ekonomika, politika, kul'tura*. Moskva.
- Grač, N.L. 1984. Otkrytie novogo istoričeskogo istočnika v Nimfee, *VDI* 1, 81-88.
- Grač, N.L. 1987. Ein neu entdecktes Fresko aus hellenistischer Zeit in Nymphaion bei Kertsch, *Skythika. Kolloquium, München 7.9.1985 (AbhMünchen, 98)*. München, 87-96.
- Kolobova, K.S. 1949. Farnak I Pontijskij, *VDI* 3, 27-35.
- Kovalenko, S.A. 1999. O monetnom dele Chersonesa Tavričeskogo v pozdneklassičeskiju epochu, *NumEpigr* 16, 108-131.
- Lomouri, N.Ju. 1979. *K istorii Pontijskogo Carstva*. Tbilisi.

- Maksimova, M.I. 1956. *Antičnye goroda jugo-vostočnogo Pričernomor'ja*. Moskva.
- Marčenko, I.I. 1996. *Siraki Kubani*. Krasnodar.
- Minns, E. 1913. *Scythians and Greeks*. Cambridge.
- Molev, E.A. 1994. *Bospor v period ellinizma*. Nižnij Novgorod.
- Molev, E.A. 1995. *Vlastitel' Ponta*. Nižnij Novgorod.
- Molev, E.A. 1998. K voprosu o mestopoloženii carstva Gatala. *Problemy istorii i tvorčeskoe nasledie professora N.P. Sokolova*. Nižnij Novgorod, 37-39.
- Pal'ceva, L.A. 1979. Chersones i pontijskie cari, in: *Antičnyj polis*. Leningrad, 71-81.
- Polin, S.V. 1992. *Ot Skifii k Sarmatii*. Kiev.
- Puzdrovskij, A.E. 1995. O skifo-chersonesskich konfliktach v III – II vv. do n.e., in: *Antičnye polisy i mestnoe naselenie Pričernomor'ja*. Sevastopol', 142-146.
- Saprykin S.Ju. 1979. Gerakleja, Chersones i Farnak I Pontijskij, *VDI* 3, 43-59.
- Saprykin, S.Ju. 1986. *Gerakleja Pontijskaja i Chersones Tavričeskij*. Moskva.
- Ščeglov, A.N. 1978. *Severo-Zapadnyj Krym v antičnuju epochu*. Leningrad.
- Šelov-Kovedjaev, F.V. 1984. Istorija Bospora v VI – IV vv. do n.e. in: *Drevnejšie gosudarstva na territorii SSSR, 1984 g.* Moskva, 5-187.
- Turovskij, E.Ja. 1995. K voprosu o vnešnej politike grečeskich gosudarstv Pričernomor'ja v IV-III vv. do n.e., in: *Antičnye polisy i mestnoe naselenie Pričernomor'ja*. Sevastopol', 150-157.
- Turovskij, E.Ja. 1997. *Monety nezavisimogo Chersonesa IV-II vv. do n.e.* Sevastopol'.
- Vinogradov Ju.G. 1987. Votivnaja nadpis' dočeri carja Skilura iz Pantikapeja i problemy istorii Skifii i Bospora vo II v. do n.e., *VDI* 1, 55-87.
- Vinogradov, Ju.G. & A.N. Ščeglov 1990. Obrazovanie territorial'nogo Chersonesskogo gosudarstva, in: Golubcova (ed.) 1990, 310-371.
- Vinogradov, Ju.G. 1995. Pont Evksinskij kak politiko-ekonomičeskoe i kul'-turnoe edinstvo i epigrafika, in: *Antičnye polisy i mestnoe naselenie Pričernomor'ja*. Sevastopol', 5-56.
- Zavojkin, A.A. 2000. Afiny - Bospor - Gerakleja Pontijskaja. in: O.L. Gabelko & V.D. Žigunin (eds.) *Mežgosudarstvennyje otnošenija i diplomatija v antičnosti*. Kazan', 249-268.
- Žolotarev, M.I. 1984. Dva tipa redkich monet Feodosii IV v. do n.e., *VDI* 1, 89-92.

Abbreviations

- CIRB V.V. Struve et al., *Corpus inscriptionum Regni Bosporani*. Moskva-Leningrad 1965.
- IOSPE B. Latyshev, *Inscriptiones antiquae orae septentrionalis Ponti Euxini Graecae et Latinae*. Petropolis 1885-1916.