

The Rock-tombs of the Pontic Kings in Amaseia (Amasya)

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The five big tombs (Figs. 1-3) in the rocks above the city of Amaseia (Amasya) are the most impressive archaeological remains of the Kingdom of Pontos, and nearly its only preserved remains at all, if we leave aside the beautiful Hellenistic walls which remain from the *basileia* (Fig. 1, right side) in the same city and its acropolis at the top of Harşena dağı. Together with some other tombs in- and outside Amasya they represent the most recent group of rock-tombs from the Archaic to the Hellenistic age in Anatolia, following their forerunners in Urartu, Phrygia, Lykia, Karia, and Paphlagonia.

Amaseia was the capital of the dynasty of the Mithridatids for about a century, between about 281 and 180 BC. The five kings Mithridates I, Ariobar-



Fig. 1. Amasya, Tombs A-E (from the right to the left) (photo: N. Birkle).



Fig. 2. Amasya, Tombs A-C (from the right to the left) (photo: N. Birkle).



Fig. 3. Amasya, Tombs D (right), E (left) (photo: N. Birkle).

zanes, Mithridates II and III, and Pharnakes I all ruled here. Strabon, a native of Amaseia, gives a description of his home city and mentions the *μνήματα*, the monuments / tombs of the kings, in the area of the *basileia* (12.3.39).

In September 2002 research into this area was carried out by the author together with architect, Falko Ahrendt-Flemming and archaeologist Nicole Birkle. Bay Celal Özdemir, of the Amasya Museum, was commissar and representative of the Turkish Government. Alpay Pasınlı, General Director of Eski Eserler ve Anıtlar Genel Müdürlüğü, Ankara, provided us with permission to study the tombs. Our work was made possible by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft's program "Forms and ways of acculturation in the eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea-area in Antiquity". Additional support was given by Gerda Henkel Stiftung, Düsseldorf, and Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz. We wish to thank all of these institutions and individuals.

We first made elevations, ground-plans and sections, based on digital photography followed by photogrammetric elaboration using the program "Photomodeler" and finally drawn with CAD (Computer aided design). Digital reconstructions were executed by the archaeologist Annette Niessner. As an example the facade of Tomb A is shown here (Fig. 4).

The royal necropolis consists of two groups of tombs which we have called, starting from the right side, A-E. Tomb A, B, and C (Fig. 2) are situated in the east, close to the remains of the Royal *basileia* with well preserved Hellenistic walls (Fig. 1, right side), while tomb D and E (Fig. 3) are situated in the west. Tomb A is accessible from the *basileia* by a staircase which is cut into the rock. Another staircase leads to the higher level of tombs B and C. The way continues to the northwest through a tunnel. From its end one could climb up to the acropolis, passing a long and deep stepped tunnel used for water-supply, or walk down to the west to the entrance of another tunnel with steps inside and a staircase leading up to the ample terrace in front of tomb D. Another staircase, cut into the almost vertical rock in the form of a gallery (Fig. 5), leads up to tomb E.

At the time of the construction of the tombs, it was planned to surround all of them with corridors in order to give the impression of free-standing buildings in the rock. The prototypes for structures like this can be found in 4th century BC Karia, in Kaunos, Telmessos and other places.¹ But only the corridors of B, C (Fig. 6), and D were completely executed. Work on the corridor of A was begun, but soon given up because of the very crumbly rock with many fissures in it. The execution of the corridor of E was also suddenly given up before its completion. This happened evidently when Pharnakes I decided to move his capital from Amaseia to Sinope, which he had conquered a short time before, and which as an important sea-port with international connections was much better qualified to be the residence of the kings, in accordance with the increased political and economic role of Pontos. Consequently Pharnakes wished to be buried here, in his new capital.

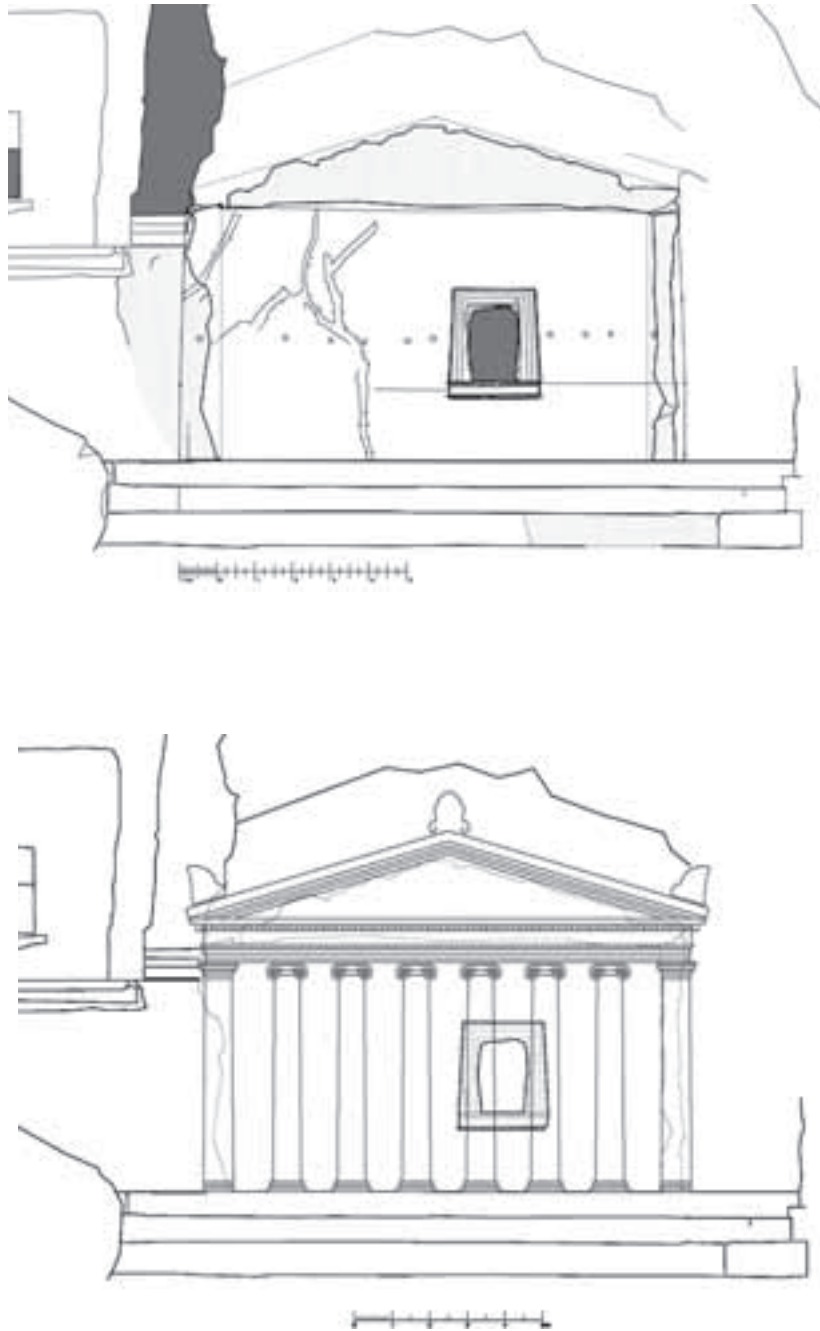


Fig. 4 a-d. Amasya, Tomb A, elevation, reconstruction, plan, section (F. Ahrendt-Flemming, R. Fleischer & A. Niessner).

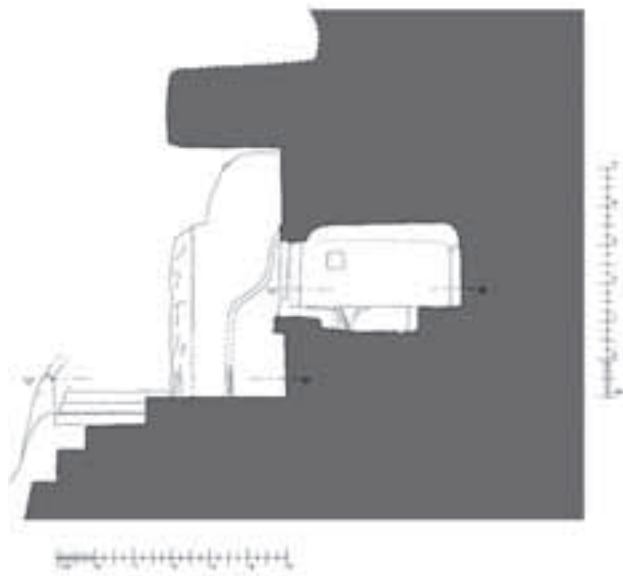
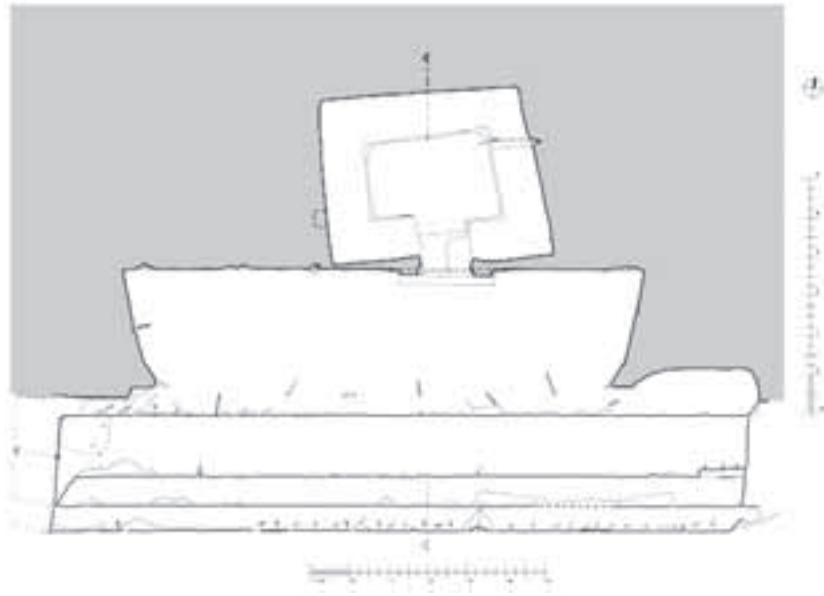




Fig. 5. Amasya, staircase from Tomb D to E (photo: N. Birkle).



Fig. 6. Amasya, corridors behind Tombs B and C (photo: N. Birkle).



Fig. 7. Amasya, Tomb A, chamber (photo: N. Birkle).

Another common feature of the five tombs is the high position of the entrances to the grave-chambers; they are accessible only with a ladder. It is very likely that this position was chosen according to Iranian rules of purity. One may compare the high entrances of the royal tombs of the Achaemenids from Dareios I to Dareios III in Naqš-e Rostam and Persepolis.²

The chambers are rather small, with or without benches along their sides (Fig. 7), intended to give space for only a single or at least a very limited number of corpses.

Research of the last century has not considered the appearance of the royal tombs in ancient times to be very different from their actual ones today: *Naiskos*- or *aedicula*-like structures without columns, with either a pediment or a kind of archivolt at the top.³ Only the traces of stone revetment, which covered the surface of Tomb E was always observed. But traces of columns were already noted 135 years ago by the French expedition of G. Perrot, E. Guillaume and J. Delbet⁴ – perhaps they were later covered with debris and no longer visible until recent times. These traces indicate that three of the five tombs had facades with columns: Tomb A (Fig. 4) had six, B and D four each. At the inner side of the right anta of Tomb B traces of an Attic base are preserved, which means that the four columns had bases of the same shape and Ionic capitals. We may assume that the facades of Tomb A and D were of Ionic order, too. Tomb C and E with their rounded tops did not have columns.

Many other parts of the tombs were made separately and connected with the surface of the rock by means of dowels and clamps of which traces are still visible: parts of the steps in front of the facades, parts of the antae, thresholds, and lintels of the doors etc.

In accordance with the shape of the corridors and some technical details of the execution it can be argued that the chronological sequence of the three tombs in the east was not A – B – C, but A – C – B. Tomb B was built as the last and placed between A and C with considerable effort. There was no more space left in the rocks above the fortified *basileia* area, and the later tombs D and E had to be placed at a long distance from them. Consequently the sequence of the tombs and their attribution to the five kings is as follows:

- Tomb A: Mithridates I
- Tomb C: Ariobarzanes
- Tomb B: Mithridates II
- Tomb D: Mithridates III
- Tomb E: Pharnakes

The tombs do not follow a linear, logical development: Hexastyle portico with pediment (tomb A), portico without columns and with round top (tomb C), tetrastyle portico with pediment (tombs B and D), and finally portico without columns with stone revetments and archivolt at the top (tomb E). This



Fig. 8. Amasya, Tomb of Tes (photo: N. Birkle).

development – rather a change between two forms – looks very unusual if we compare these tombs with the rock-tombs of other areas in Anatolia. In Phrygia, Lykia, Karia, and Paphlagonia the local forms disappear gradually; they are first enriched with some imported Greek forms and later replaced by an entirely Greek appearance. In Amaseia we are confronted with a development in the opposite direction. The form inspired by Greek temple architecture is finally replaced by the un-Greek form of Pharnakes' Tomb E, which set a new standard for rock-tombs in Pontos. It was imitated in and near Amaseia in the Tomb of Tes⁵ (Fig. 8) with its original large inscription and a second



Fig. 9. Lâcin, Tomb of Hikesios (photo: N. Birkle).

one from its later reuse, and in some minor rock-tombs, but also in the huge tomb of Hikesios near Lâcin, Province of Çorum, about 80 km west of Amasya, the biggest (nearly 13 m high) rock-tomb in Anatolia (Fig. 9).⁶ The origin of this form is not yet distinct. Due to its vault with an angle of 110° instead of a 180° -hemicircle it cannot imitate real architecture in stone; a building like this could not stand without additional support on both sides.

It is remarkable that the well-known rock-inscription (Fig. 10) is situated above the Tomb of Pharnakes.⁷ This inscription tells that the *phourarchos* (commander of the castle) (Me)trodoros dedicated an altar and a flower-bed for the king Pharnakes to the gods. This altar and flower-bed must have been located on the small plateau in front of the inscription. Steps in the rock, today partially visible, led to this place. If Tomb E really was Pharnakes' last resting-place, as has been projected, this dedication would have been near to his corpse.

We may ask why the development of rock-tombs in Pontos was so different from that in other landscapes of Anatolia. Looking at the coin-portraits of the Pontic kings before Mithridates VI,⁸ which are very unusual in the context of the Hellenistic world of the third and second century BC and bring to mind individuals of the Roman republic and late Hellenistic "*philorhomaioi*"-kings rather than contemporaneous rulers, one could assume that an anti-Greek and anti-Hellenistic attitude lay behind this development. Yet it has been



Fig. 10. Amasya, dedication for Pharnakes (photo: N. Birkle).

shown that this attitude did not exist. Pontic kings presented themselves as *philhellenes*, just like other rulers did.⁹ Maybe the new shape of Pharnakes I's rock-tomb, already preceded by Ariobarzanes' Tomb B, had its roots in some local traditions unknown to us.

The development of Pontic rock-tombs was cut off when Pharnakes I made Sinope his capital. No large rock-tombs can be found there, and the later kings, from Pharnakes I with his second and final tomb, which we have to assume, down to Mithridates VI, who was buried "in the graves of his ancestors",¹⁰ found their place most probably in *tumuli* or mausolea. In which way would the development have continued, if Amaseia had persisted as the capital down to the last, great king of Pontos to whom our symposion has been devoted?

Notes

- 1 Roos 1972, 90.
- 2 Schmidt 1970.
- 3 For example Gall 1967, 594-595.
- 4 Perrot, Guillaume & Delbet 1872, 383-385, pl. 76.1; 77.1,3; 79.1.
- 5 Fleischer 2005, 274, 278-279, 283, fig. 4.
- 6 Marek 2003, 32, 39, figs. 54-55; Fleischer 2005, 274, 278-279, 283, fig. 4.
- 7 OGIS I 573-575, no. 365; Anderson, Cumont & Grégoire 1910, 114-115, no. 94.

- 8 Smith 1988, 113, 122, pl. 77. 9-12.
9 Olshausen 1974, 157-170; Callataÿ 2003, 220-222.
10 App. *Mith.* 16.113; Dio Cass. 37.14.1. For a different interpretation, see the following article by J.M. Højte.

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