

The Death and Burial of Mithridates VI

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Mithridates VI, king of Pontos, died in 63 BC in Pantikapaion. The circumstances surrounding his death are to some extent obscure. One tradition holds that he tried to commit suicide by poison, but that a long life of self-administered antidotes made him unable to fulfil his intention. In the end he needed the service of the sword of his Gaulish bodyguard Bituitus.¹ Another tradition holds that he was murdered by the troops that had deserted to his son Pharnakes (often called the second to distinguish him from his great-grandfather, the king of Pontos), who had joined a rebellion against the aging king instigated by the city of Phanagoreia.² The reason for the rebellion should allegedly have been the futile and hopeless plan of Mithridates to raise a new army with which he would attack Italy by way of the northern Black Sea and the Balkans.³ Pharnakes had the body summarily embalmed and sent off to Pontos with a request to be appointed king of his ancestral domain. Pharnakes evidently thought that Pompeius would appreciate his help in ridding him of Mithridates, and that his treachery towards his father would call for a reward. This was not the last time Pharnakes misjudged the intentions of a Roman general. Fifteen years later, by Zela, it nearly cost him his life when he tried to regain the Pontic throne in the aftermath of the war between Pompeius and Caesar.

Pompeius received the news of the death of his adversary, Mithridates, in the dessert south of Jerusalem, as he was advancing on the Nabataean Kingdom and its capital Petra. An odd place, to say the least, considering that the man he had been sent from Rome to capture, for nearly three years had ruled in the Bosporan Kingdom more than 1500 km to the north. Plutarch notes a certain irritation by Pompeius, which he ascribed to the awkwardness of the situation. Pompeius was in the middle of his afternoon exercise, and there was no tribunal from which he could address his troops.⁴ Perhaps his irritation ran deeper. The elimination of Mithridates terminated Pompeius' legal grounds of the Lex Manilia for campaigning in the East. He had no choice but to return to Rome and celebrate the triumph leaving the eastern frontier without a permanent settlement.

That Pompeius from early on had designs beyond capturing Mithridates seems certain. After he had routed Mithridates from Pontos rather quickly without much effort in 66 BC, he was surprisingly reluctant to pursue Mithridates, who had fled to Kolchis and held winter quarters at Dioskourias before continuing to Pantikapaion the following spring.⁵ Pompeius advanced

from Armenia into Albania and Iberia, while avoiding Mithridates in Kolchis. These expeditions do not seem to have been justified by military needs as some sources relate, but were rather aimed at extending Rome's, and not least Pompeius', sphere of influence by being the first to establish connections with kings, cities, and dynasts in these regions.⁶ Had Mithridates been the target, Pompeius could have employed the undisputed Roman supremacy at sea to cut off Mithridates before he reached the Kimmerian Bosphoros. Instead after meeting some resistance from the Albani, he abandoned his enterprise in Transcaucasus and turned south to grander exploits, conquering the East and becoming the new Roman Alexander. Mithridates could easily be picked up later on the way back to Rome.

There are different opinions as to the extent to which Pompeius practiced *imitatio Alexandri*. Devon Martin recently in an article argued that all instances of comparisons between Pompeius and Alexander could be attributed to slander from his opponents or to later authors' habit of *comparatio*.⁷ Pompeius himself never engaged in *imitatio* as Alexander had a very poor reputation in Rome. However, the sources Martin bases her argument upon are primarily Augustan and their negative attitude towards Alexander without doubt refers to Marcus Anthonius' extensive use of Alexander in his propaganda.⁸ Earlier in the century, Alexander was highly praised, and to my mind, there can be no doubt that Pompeius actively sought to imitate Alexander in both appearance and in actions. In this respect he was much like Mithridates, who even claimed descent from Alexander as well as the Persian king Dareios. Many examples of Pompeius' imitations of Alexander have been discussed previously, but more can still be added.⁹ One particularly interesting example concerning the burial of Mithridates has hitherto not been discussed in this connection. It is of some importance because it is not written into a context of *imitatio* or *comparatio* in the sources. In almost all other instances the authors relate that Pompeius' actions were intended to imitate Alexander, and in these cases we must of course be very skeptical about their authenticity, because it may be a result of later authors' *comparatio* rather than real *imitatio* by Pompeius.¹⁰

The body of Mithridates was transferred from Pantikapaion to either Amisos (so Plut. *Pomp.* 42.2) or Sinope (so App. *Mith.* 113) together with other dead members of his family, Roman deserters, and the royal paraphernalia. Pompeius journeyed hastily to the Pontic shore from Palestine, but by the time of his arrival the insufficiency of the embalming was becoming apparent. The body had begun to deteriorate and the face was no longer recognisable because the brain had not been properly removed. Pompeius refused to inspect the body himself, supposedly out of respect for the dead king.

Then Pompeius took the rather surprising decision to provide funds for a proper funeral for Mithridates. He was to be interred in the tomb of his forefathers. No adversary of Rome, and especially one who had fought so determined against Rome for such a long time, had received such an honour, and

with an heir to the throne still around, this was not an act without possible political consequences. There exist, however, a very good historical parallel. Alexander the Great had Dareios III interred in the ancestral tombs of the Persian kings outside Persepolis, and Pompeius undoubtedly had this incident in mind when he decided to personally see to the funeral of the Pontic king. By doing so Pompeius could relegate the philhellene king to an oriental despot, while he at the same time would appear as a new Alexander, liberator of the Greeks.

Where was the final resting place of Mithridates?

Although Plutarch and Appianos disagree as to where the body was initially sent from Pantikapaion, they agree that the royal tomb was at Sinope. Plutarch (*Pomp.* 42.3) briefly states that Pompeius, after having received the delegation from Pharnakes, had the body of the dead king sent away to Sinope without mentioning further details about the arrangement of the burial. Appianos, who assumed that the body was already in Sinope, informs us that the body was interred in the tombs of the kings. The word Appianos uses is the non-descript τάφοι.

The last source to mention the burial of Mithridates, Dio Cassius (37.14.1), does not specify where the funeral took place; only that he was laid to rest in the tombs of his forefathers, here described as ἡοῖα. The use of the plural has led to the assumption that Pharnakes I, the grandfather of Mithridates VI, had moved the primary royal residence to Sinope shortly after he had captured the city in 183 BC and had constructed a monumental tomb there – or that this was done during the short reign of Mithridates IV at the latest. Otherwise there could only have been one king previously interred in the royal cemetery.

At what time Sinope became metropolis of the Pontic Kingdom and what that implied in respect to its status and administrative function within the kingdom is hard to determine. We are told in second century AD sources that Mithridates made the city the capital, but it probably held prime importance and overshadowed the former capital Amaseia earlier than that. Mithridates was born in Sinope and this is also where he ousted his mother, Laodike, in 113 BC. But Mithridates and his predecessors did not reside there permanently. There were other royal palaces as well, and it is quite clear from the accounts of the Mithridatic Wars that Mithridates was accustomed to moving around in his domain. At Kabeira a palace with extensive grounds had been built by him, and another palace is known at Amisos, which seems to have been a very significant administrative centre. In Plutarch's account this is where Pharnakes first sent the body of Mithridates, and the city also seem to have possessed the most active mint.¹¹ He furthermore had a residence at Lake Stifane, and finally Strabon's account of his hometown Amaseia reveals that the palace there was not abandoned even if the city had ceased to function as the

primary royal residence.¹² Later during the Roman Imperial period, Sinope indisputably became the most important city in the region and it is quite possible that this has contributed to an overestimation of the city's importance within the framework of the Pontic Kingdom. I am somewhat suspicious about the correctness of the information the sources present about the burial place of Mithridates. The disagreement about where the body of Mithridates was sent and Dio's failure to give a location gives reason to believe that by the second century AD, details about the sequence of events was no longer readily available, and if Plutarch and Appianos had no exact knowledge, their obvious choice for a location would be Sinope.

Hellenistic royal tombs

If we for the moment accept Sinope as the burial place, what type of royal burial place should we expect Pharnakes I or his brother Mithridates IV to have constructed? Rock-cut tombs such as the royal tombs at Amaseia can easily be ruled out, as there are no suitable rock formations within or in the vicinity of Sinope. The ἠρώριον of Dio can be used to describe a variety of sepulchres but it regularly denotes tumuli. There are in fact tumuli around Sinope but according to Owen Doonan, who has surveyed the region around Sinope intensely over the past years, none of the tumuli would really qualify as the royal cemetery as they are relatively small and insignificant. Nothing like the tumulus Antiochos I of Kommagene constructed at Nemrud Dağı about two decades later than the death of Mithridates.¹³ This tomb and its attached sacred lands is exactly the type of monument we could have expected from the later Pontic kings, who like Antiochos claimed descend from both Alexander and Dareios and who seem to have followed a somewhat similar religious policy of advocating temple states and syncretistic gods.

Our knowledge of Hellenistic royal tombs is in fact surprisingly limited. One could in a sense say that the only royal tombs surviving intact are in fact the first and the last, namely those at Vergina normally associated with Philip II and at Nemrud Dağı for Antiochos I.¹⁴ No comprehensive study of Hellenistic Royal tombs has yet been made, but a brief survey of the available evidence gives an impression of large diversity in the choice of royal funerary monuments.¹⁵

One of the few recurring features is their proximity to the royal palace. This occurs in the Persian palaces at Pasargadae and Persepolis and to a lesser extent in the Macedonian cemetery at Vergina. The Ptolemies chose the same model in Alexandria for the tomb of Alexander, which continued as the burial place for the Ptolemaic kings. Indeed the tombs of the Pontic kings in Amaseia were also within the compound of the palace.¹⁶ Relatively little excavation has so far been carried out in Sinope and no parts of the royal palace has yet been found. If indeed the ancestral tomb was in Sinope, this should in all likelihood be the place to find it.

Amaseia

As suggested above, Plutarch and Appianos may be wrong in placing the tomb of Mithridates at Sinope. It is worth to consider whether he could have been buried in Amaseia. Strabon, in his description of his hometown (12.3.39), mentions the memorials of the kings but fails to inform about their discontinued use many generations before his own time. There can be no doubt that the tombs in question are the five rock cut tombs set high above the city on the right bank of the Iris, which also figure on early third century AD coins of Amaseia. The tombs are arranged in two groups of two and three and are of a type of tomb unique to Pontos in that the tomb chambers are cut free of the rock all around (Figs. 1-2). There exist further rock-cut tombs within the area of the palace and the acropolis, but apart from the one down the slope by the railway tunnel, the other tombs are rather insignificant.¹⁷

The prime argument against the continued use of the royal tombs in Amaseia has been that the five tombs, one supposedly being left unfinished, fits neatly with the information in Appianos, that there were seven kings of Pontos before Mithridates VI and thus four before Pharnakes. Supposedly Pharnakes made Sinope the capital of the Pontic Kingdom after having captured the city in 183 BC and consequently abandoned the already initiated building



Fig. 1: The royal tombs in Amaseia. The “unfinished tomb” to the left.



Fig. 2: The royal tombs in Amaseia. The three earliest tombs.

project in Amaseia.¹⁸ However, a number of objections can be raised against this interpretation. First of all, our knowledge about the Pontic kings prior to Pharnakes is scant at best. In fact as to the number of kings we rely primarily on the information of Appianos, and for one of the kings in the reconstructed line we possess no independent evidence for his existence.¹⁹ More importantly we do not know whether each new king constructed his own tomb. That was certainly the case with the tombs of the Persian kings near Persepolis, but these tombs were individualised with inscriptions and reliefs showing the exploits of the king. There are no signs that the tombs in Amaseia had any comparable decoration. This could have been painted, but there does not seem to be any trace of this, and on two other similar tombs in Pontos the name of the owner of the tombs was inscribed on the facade or on the rock face beside it.²⁰ This is not the case with the royal tombs in Amaseia. Furthermore the tombs were certainly made to accommodate more than one burial as the tomb chambers have cuttings for more funerary couches. The family tree of the Pontic kings, as we know it today from the sources, is very much a tree turned upside down with many branches at the bottom and thinning at the top.²¹ Of the families of the seven Pontic kings that preceded Mithridates VI, we only possess the names of four wives and three sisters – Laodike Philadelphos being both the sister and the wife of Mithridates V. In comparison Mithridates is known to have had no less than 18 children and he had at least six siblings. We have

Fig. 3: Cuttings for fastening architectural details on the front of the ante on the "unfinished tomb".



no reason to believe that the structure of the Pontic royal family was any different before the time of Mithridates VI. It is a matter of scarcity of sources. We should therefore expect each generation of the house to have consisted of quite a large number of individuals some of whom at least would be buried in the royal tombs. On this background, I do not think that we necessarily should expect a one to one relationship between king and tomb. Furthermore we do not know whether the tradition of burying the kings within the palace compound in Amaseia was initiated by Mithridates I. The earliest kings of Pontos could have been buried elsewhere. Instead of supposing that Mithridates I was the first to be buried in the rock cut tombs within the palace it is equally possible that it was Mithridates III.

Judging from the development of the architecture of the tombs, a chronological sequence can be established with the easternmost being the earliest

and the westernmost, the so-called unfinished tomb, the latest. Although the tomb chamber of the unfinished tomb unlike most of the others was not cut entirely free of the rock, other refinements show that the tomb must have been nearly completed when the cutting at the back was abandoned. There are for example cuttings around the facade for fastening metal adornments, which we should expect were among the final refinements of the tomb (Fig. 3). It can therefore not be excluded that the tomb was in fact used at some point.

Conclusion

There are three possible solutions to the question of the burial place of Mithridates VI: 1) he could have been buried in Sinope in a tomb constructed in connection with the royal palace there; 2) the royal tombs were always at Amaseia; 3) there was a royal tomb in Sinope, but Pompeius chose to bury Mithridates at Amaseia, as this would best resemble the example of Alexander. At the moment, I am most inclined to believe in the second possibility.

Apart from the question of the location of the tomb, the story of the burial of Mithridates is important because it strongly indicates that Pompeius did in fact try to imitate Alexander, who likewise provided a proper funeral for his adversary Dareios III. Pompeius' decision concerning the body of Mithridates VI was quite unusual for a Roman general, and the only reasonable explanation must be, that he had the example of Alexander in mind when faced with the question in Amisos in 63 BC.

Notes

- 1 App. *Mith.* 111.
- 2 Dio Cass. 37.13.
- 3 Sonnabend 1998, 191-206.
- 4 Plut. *Pomp.* 41.3-5; Greenhalgh 1981, 146.
- 5 McGing 1986, 164.
- 6 Braund 1994, 161-163.
- 7 Martin 1998, 23-51.
- 8 Michel 1967, 109-132.
- 9 Examples of *imitatio Alexandri* by Pompeius are discussed in Michel 1967, 33-66; Bohm 1989; Martin 1998, 23-51.
- 10 For the question of *imitatio* and *comparatio* in our sources, see Green 1978, 1-26.
- 11 Callataÿ 2005, 131-132.
- 12 For the royal palaces at Sinope: Diod. Sic. 14.31.1; Kabeira: Strab. 12.3.30; Amisos: Strab. 12.3.14; at Lake Stiphane: Strab. 12.3.38; Amaseia: Strab. 12.3.39.
- 13 Sanders 1996.
- 14 Stewart 2003, 54.
- 15 In addition to the ones mentioned here there exist a few other isolated examples of royal tombs. Seleukos I Nikator was probably buried in the vault under the Doric Temple excavated in Seleukeia in Pieria in Syria, the so-called Nikatoreion, but we have no reason to believe that this served as tomb for any later members of the

- Seleukid dynasty (Hannestad & Potts 1990, 116; App. *Syr.* 63). Outside Ephesos at Belevi a monumental tomb in the tradition of the Mausoleum in Halikarnassos was constructed at the turn of the 4th and 3rd century BC, which most likely belonged to an early Hellenistic king. Lysimachos the re-founder of Ephesos has been suggested but so has the Seleukid king Antiochos I (Praschniker & Theuer 1979). In Pergamon the Attalid kings were probably buried in the large tumuli at the outskirts of the town, but this has never been confirmed by excavation.
- 16 Nielsen (1995, 14) mentions tombs as a feature of several Hellenistic palaces. The palace in Amaseia is not included in the discussion.
 - 17 Jerphanion 1973, 5-10.
 - 18 Fleischer 2005, 273. The tombs in Amaseia are currently being investigated by a team lead by Robert Fleischer, see the previous article.
 - 19 Højte 2005, 137-152.
 - 20 Fleischer 2005, 273-284: the tomb of Tes on the outskirts of Amaseia and the tomb of Hikesios at Laçin.
 - 21 Olshausen 1978, 399-400.

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