

# Portraits and Statues of Mithridates VI

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The problems inherent to discussing the portraits of Mithridates VI have recently been highlighted by two novel suggestions for identifications. The first concerns the so-called “Schwarzenberg Alexander” now in the München Glyptotek (Fig. 1). Erkingen von Schwarzenberg first published the portrait belonging to his private collection as a portrait of Alexander the Great by



*Fig. 1. So-called  
“Schwarzenberger  
Alexander” in München  
Glyptotek (author’s photo).*



Figs. 2a-b. Tetradrachms of Mithridates VI. a) early portrait type before 85 BC. b) later portrait type after 87 BC.

Lysippos in 1967.<sup>1</sup> Several years later it was sold to the München Glyptotek, which lacked an Alexander in its extensive collection of portraits. The purchaser of course never questioned the identification. Other scholars have accepted it cautiously. Most objections raised have centred on its date and Lysippean origin. Lately, however, Lorenz has also questioned whether it portrays Alexander at all.<sup>2</sup> The shape of the head is different from the other known portrait types of Alexander, as is the rendering of the hair on the sides and in the back. The only structural resemblance to the portraits of Alexander is in fact the *anastole*. But several other Hellenistic kings employed this particular feature in hopes of emphasizing their relation to their great predecessor, among these Mithridates VI in particular. Indeed, comparison with the coin portraits of Mithridates (Fig. 2a-b) shows a certain resemblance – particularly with regard to the lower part of the face. The implication of this suggestion, if correct, is that Mithridates went much further in his identification with Alexander than previously assumed.

The other example is Bernard Andreae's suggestion in two articles that the small boy on the arm of a statue of Herakles in the Vatican in fact depicts Mithridates VI as the young Telephos (Fig. 3).<sup>3</sup> The argument is that Mithridates VI resided in Pergamon in 88-85 BC; Telephos was the mythical king of Pergamon, so a connection between Telephos and Mithridates would legitimize his rule. Furthermore, Telephos was the son of Herakles. The Macedonian kings claimed descent from Herakles. Mithridates traced his lineage on his mother's side to Alexander, and both the literary sources and numismatic evidence show that Mithridates imitated his famous forefather, and in all likelihood also let himself be portrayed in the guise of Herakles. To add to the attractiveness of the theory, Andreae relates that Telephos was raised by a hind in one version of the myth. This identification with Telephos should suppos-

Fig. 3. Statue of Herakles in the Vatican Museum.

edly also explain the change of the reverse motif of the Mithridatic tetradrachms from Pegasus to a grazing hind (Fig. 4a-b). Several objections can be raised to this interpretation. For one thing, the grazing hind appears already on the reverse of the small series of Mithridatic drachms struck in 95 BC and on slightly later staters.<sup>4</sup> This was seven years before Mithridates came to Pergamon. Secondly, the version of the myth where a hind acts as the foster mother does not seem to have been the favoured one in Pergamon. On the Telephos Frieze on the Great Altar, Telephos is fed by a lioness.

According to Andreae, the statue also conveyed an even more subtle message, as the learned spectator immediately would recall the Eirene and Pluto by Kephisodotos and thus be reminded of the speech of Mithridates to his troops transmitted to us by Justin's epitome of Pompeius Trogus,<sup>5</sup> where he expresses his peaceful intentions towards Rome.

In the end, however, the argument rests on similarities in the rendering of the hair of the child and the hair of Mithridates VI on the early silver coinage. Andreae believes this similarity was so obvious that Sulla or more likely Pompeius took the statue as war booty, paraded it in triumph and finally had it installed in his theatre on the Mars Field. That is why the statue could be found on Campo dei Fiori in 1507.

As these two examples show, the field for identifying and interpreting portraits of Mithridates VI is wide open.<sup>6</sup> This is not a problem particular to Mithridates but to all Hellenistic ruler portraits in general. One only has to recall the Terme Ruler in Rome that, at various times, has been identified as a large share of the potentates in the Hellenistic period, although to my knowledge never as Mithridates VI. At the root of the problem lies the lack of a stringent iconography in any other media than the coinage. Perhaps it





Figs. 4a-b. Tetradrachms of Mithridates VI. a) early type with pegasos (SNGCop 18, 234). b) later type with grazing hind (SNGCop 18, 233).

never existed – perhaps the preserved material is simply too small to reveal it.<sup>7</sup>

On this background it is reasonable to raise the question whether it is at all possible to establish a series of reasonably certain portraits of Mithridates VI besides the coin portraits.

#### *Coin portraits*

The tetradrachms of Mithridates VI basically show two different portrait types conveniently called “realistic” and “idealised” (Fig. 2a-b). Apart from a very brief overlap, the two types supersede each other in the Pontic mint in mid 85 BC after the defeat of Mithridates in the First Mithridatic War. However, the tetradrachms struck at Athens and in Pergamon already feature the new portrait from 87 BC.<sup>8</sup>

The first portrait struck from about 106 BC shows the king in his thirties in a veristic style.<sup>9</sup> Compared to his distinctly Iranian-looking predecessors, the profile of Mithridates is more in accordance with royal Greek iconography of the period, without showing any of the peculiarities, like enlargement of the eyes or fluffiness of the face, that occasionally occur among other royal portraits. The hair is somewhat longer than usual and the coins often show heavy sideburns. These are, however, also found on contemporary coins of Antiochos IX. The nose is fairly short and he has a large upper lip. The hair projects in star like strands from a part at the back of the head and falls loosely to the back under the diadem.

Whereas the obverse cannot be said to carry any specific ideological references apart perhaps from its Greekness, the choice of Pegasos for the reverse motif clearly refers to the dual heritage of Mithridates, who claimed to descend from both Dareios and Alexander the Great (App. *Mith.* 112; Just. *Epit.* 38.7.1).

The myth of Pegasus was a perfectly Greek legend, which however had connections to Perseus, the mythical ancestor of the Persians. After Perseus had killed Gorgo, Pegasus flew out of the beheaded monster. Similar references to Perseus are found on many of the Pontic bronze coins.<sup>10</sup> The eight-pointed star and moon sickle seen above the head of Pegasus is the emblem either of the land of Pontos or the Pontic royal house, and it appears on all silver and gold coins.<sup>11</sup>

The later portrait type shows Mithridates younger and the process of rejuvenation progress over time. The features are softer and more idealised. The biggest difference lies in the treatment of the hair, which flows to the back in thin flame-like threads as if Mithridates is moving at great speed. Over the forehead the hair rises in clear imitation of the famous *anastole* of Alexander. Such clear imitations of Alexander are not common among Hellenistic royal portraits, but a similar attempt by the Seleukid king Diodotos half a century earlier had practically the same outcome.<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, neither Diodotos nor Mithridates chose to imitate the most common coin portraits of Alexander as Herakles.

The message implied by the portrait is to my mind straightforward. Mithridates was the new Alexander that had liberated or would liberate the Greeks from their oppressors, this time not the Persians but the Romans. The audience for this propaganda was first and foremost mercenaries fighting in his army and his allies among the Greek cities. Callataÿ has convincingly shown that a correlation exists between the minting of silver coinage and activities of war.<sup>13</sup> The fact that this portrait type devised during his campaigns in western Asia Minor and in Greece and the new reverse motif became the standard type in the Pontic mint upon his return – and for the rest of his reign – shows, I think, that Mithridates pursued this line in his foreign policy till the very end.

Apart from the imitation of Alexander we know that from early on Mithridates used Dionysos extensively in his propaganda by taking the name Neos Dionysos.<sup>14</sup> Several of the Pontic bronze coins carry Dionysic themes,<sup>15</sup> but this element does not figure prominently on the silver coins. His epithet Dionysos used in inscriptions surprisingly never occurs on the coinage, but perhaps a reflection of Dionysos was intended with the new portrait type. The same could be true for the ivy wreath encircling the reverse motive on coins struck after 95 BC.

Portraits of Mithridates have been suggested on other coin issues as well. Coins imitating the tetradrachms of Alexander struck in Messembria and Odessos under Mithridates have been suggested to carry his portrait in the guise of Herakles, but in a large study of the coinage



Fig. 5. Pontic anonymous obol with possible portrait features of Mithridates VI.

the similarities have been shown to be only superficial and coincidental.<sup>16</sup> I think the same can be said for the identification of the young man in a felt or leather cap on the anonymous Pontic obols as Mithridates (Fig. 5). The process at work in these instances seems to be that more or less portrait-like features sometimes blend into images of the gods and heroes. The artists may not have intended this consciously but simply let themselves influence by the current royal portrait. This ubiquity of the images was probably not unwelcome by the ruler, but to call them royal portraits is, I think, a misunderstanding.

### *Sculpted portraits*

Among the sculpted portraits one stands out in particular: the marble portrait with lion *exuviae* in Paris (Fig. 6a-b).<sup>17</sup> In many respects this portrait resembles the first portrait type. The profiles are nearly congruent: both have heavy brows and a pronounced chin, and the same long sideburns. The only objection one could raise is that if it wasn't for the identification with Mithridates we might have guessed the portrait to be somewhat earlier than Mithridates. While no one has seriously questioned the identification of the Louvre portrait, there is more reason to be cautious about the many other Herakles statues and statuettes that have followed in its slipstream.



Figs. 6a-b. Mithridates VI in lion *exuviae*. Louvre, MA 2321 (author's photo).

- Gilded Herakles statue found at Hadrian's Wall, identified as Mithridates because of the Eastern dress.<sup>18</sup>
- Bronze statuette in Napoli.<sup>19</sup>
- Fragmentary terracotta head with lion *exuviae* found in Sinope (Fig. 7). This could possibly be a portrait of Mithridates, but the state of preservation makes certain identification difficult.<sup>20</sup>
- Bronze statuette found in Myschako in south Russia.<sup>21</sup>

The most discussed piece in this group of possible portraits of Mithridates is the Herakles from the so-called Prometheus group found in the sanctuary of Athena in Pergamon (Fig. 8), which was immediately identified as Mithridates VI when found in 1925.<sup>22</sup> Stylistically, however, the group has many technical affinities with earlier Pergamene sculpture such as the Telephos frieze and the small Pergamene *anathema*, and Hintzen-Bohlen suggested in 1990 that Herakles instead represents Eumenes II.<sup>23</sup> One definite attraction for identifying Mithridates with Herakles is that he was master of Kolchis and the Caucasus, where Herakles according to myth had freed Prometheus.

We are on safer ground with two portraits from the northern Black Sea region. One found in Pantikapaion (Fig. 9), definitely shows a royal figure with a sharply turned head.<sup>24</sup> Unfortunately, the whole upper part of the head is lost, and we cannot tell how the hair once was shaped. The other portrait in



Fig. 7. Terracotta head in lion *exuviae* found in Sinope (after Akurgal & Budde 1956).



Fig. 8. Herakles with portrait features from the Prometheus group from Pergamon, now in Berlin (author's photo).



Fig. 9. Portrait from Pantikapaion, now in St. Peterburg (author's photo).

Odessa Museum (Fig. 10), without provenience but most probably from the area, may have belonged to an acrolithic statue.<sup>25</sup> It has the same dramatic turn as the Pantikapaion head and a pronounced Alexander-like treatment of the hair that is reminiscent of the second portrait type. The same scheme is found in royal portraits found in Athens (Fig. 11) and in Ostia (Fig. 12).<sup>26</sup> All four heads belong to the late second to early first century BC and can be said to have a very general resemblance to the coin portraits of Mithridates without reproducing them exactly. The presence of two of them within the Pontic sphere of influence makes it probable that they portray Mithridates or alternatively one of his sons. The head in Athens is most often associated with Ariarathes IX, but the portraits on his coins are nearly impossible to distinguish from those of his father.<sup>27</sup>

Stature bases found on Delos (see below) reveal that Mithridates had several portrait statues on the island. Although we would expect these to have been removed after the violent destruction by the Mithridatic troops in 88 BC, this may not have been the case. As Cicero relates in his speech against Verres, the Rhodians did not remove the conspicuously placed statue of Mithridates after his siege of the city (Cic. *Verr.* 2.65). No less than three portrait heads from Delos are commonly referred to as Mithridates. The first, a rather poorly preserved head made for insertion into a statue found in the sanctuary of Apollon has

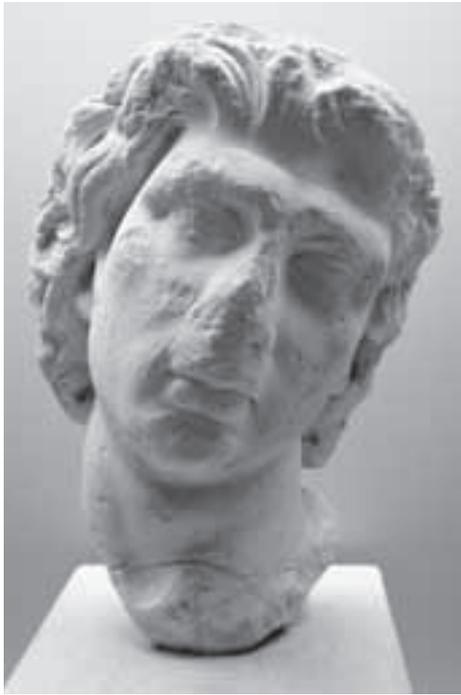


Fig. 10. Portrait in Odessa Museum (author's photo).

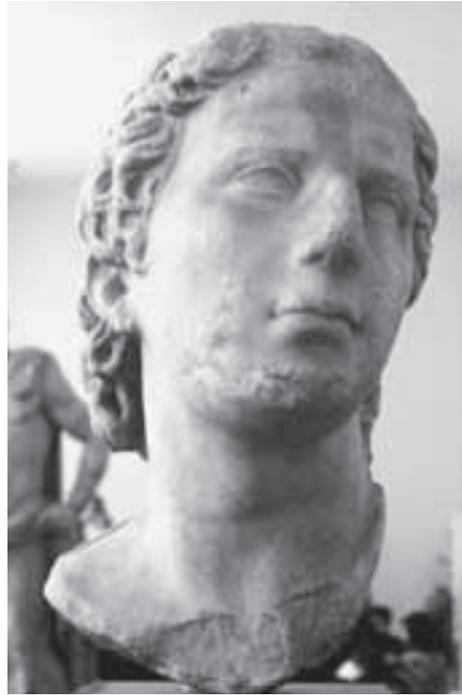


Fig. 11. Portrait in the National Museum in Athens, NM 3556 (author's photo).

many of the characteristics of the head in Ostia.<sup>28</sup> The second, the so-called Inopus head, named after its finding place, seems to be a hybrid between Alexander and another king.<sup>29</sup> The proximity to the Kabeirion where portraits of Mithridates definitely were erected makes him a likely but far from certain candidate. The third portrait, the so-called horned king,<sup>30</sup> I find very difficult



Fig. 12. Portrait from Ostia, now in Frascati (after Calza 1964, pl. 7).



Fig. 13. Portrait found on the acropolis in Pantikapaion. Kerch Lapidarium, inv. no. 1900 (author's photo).

to accept on account of the goat's horns. A few Argead kings, in particular Antigonos Gonatas, seem to have identified themselves with Pan, but there is no evidence to support the idea that Mithridates should have done the same.

To make the circle of previously identified portraits complete, I will mention Krug's identification of a second-century AD bust of Helios,<sup>31</sup> which seems rather farfetched.

To the more probable portrait identifications can now be added a miniature head found in 1992 in Pantikapaion in an excavation of a small temple on the acropolis (Fig. 13).<sup>32</sup> The head was found by the *anta*, but it is not entirely clear what its relation to the temple was. Even for a miniature portrait the facial features are somewhat summarily executed, but it seems to belong to the primary group of portraits of Mithridates; in particular, the Odessa ruler and the Ostia head show affinities. Although an arm was found with the head, we have very little idea about what sort of statue they belonged to. Drillings indicate that the statue was repaired or pieced together from different parts.



Fig. 14. Obol of Pantikapaion with Men with the Pontic symbol, crescent and six-rayed star.

There is furthermore a drilled hole on top of the head at the intersection of two grooves, and the back of the head was obviously not meant to have been visible. The portrait therefore carried some sort of headdress. One solution could be a Phrygian cap adorned with stars, like the one we see on a bronze portrait of Queen Dynamis in the State Hermitage Museum<sup>33</sup> and on coins struck in Pantikapaion with a figure of Men (Fig. 14).<sup>34</sup> The latter interestingly carries the Pontic symbol star and crescent to denote its origin. Other reconstructions for the headdress are of course also possible.

In answer to the question of whether it is possible to identify portraits of Mithridates VI, there is a small group of fairly certain portraits: the head with lion *exuviae* in Paris, the three heads from the northern Black Sea area, the Athens and Ostia heads, and possibly the two Delos heads. Beyond that, I think we move into the area of speculation, where we should be very cautious about drawing too far-reaching conclusions. The risk of circular argumentation is always near, as in the identification of the statues with lion *exuviae*.

#### *Other sources for portraits of Mithridates VI*

#### **Literary sources<sup>35</sup>**

##### *Statue in Rhodos*

- Cic. Verr. 2.65: ..., though they hated that king as no other people did, laid no hand upon the statue of him, that stood in the most frequented part of their city, not even when that city was in actual danger. It might perhaps seem hardly fitting, when they were eager for the overthrow of the man himself, to preserve the image and likeness of him. But I found, when I was among them, that they have an inherited sense of the sanctity, as it were, of such things; and they argued thus,

*that with the statue they had thought of the time when it was set up; with the man, of the time when he was fighting them and was their enemy.*

#### Images in Lucullus' triumph

- *Plut. Luc. 37: A hundred and ten bronze-beaked ships of war were also carried along, a golden statue of Mithridates himself, six feet in height, a wonderful shield ...*

#### Images in Pompeius' triumph

- *Plin. HN 33.11.54: The view is held that the extension of the use of silver to statues was made in the case of statues of his late lamented Majesty Augustus, owing to the sycophancy of the period, but this is erroneous. We find that previously a silver statue of Pharnaces the First, King of Pontos, was carried in the triumphal procession of Pompey the Great, as well as one of Mithridates Eupator, and also chariots of gold and silver were used.*
- *App. Mith. 116: In the triumphal procession were two-horse-carriages and litters laden with gold or with other ornaments of various kinds, also the couch of Darius, the son of Hystaspes, the throne and sceptre of Mithridates himself, and his image, eight cubits high, made of solid gold, and 75,100,000 drachmas of silver coin ...*
- *App. Mith. 117: There were carried in the procession images of those who were not present, of Tigranes and Mithridates, representing them as fighting, as vanquished, and as fleeing. Even the besieging of Mithridates and his silent flight by night were represented. Finally it was shown how he died, and the daughters who chose to perish with him were pictured also, and there were figures of the sons and daughters who died before him, and images of the barbarian gods decked out in the fashion of their countries.*

#### Ring of Aristion/Athenion

- *Ath. 212d (Poseidonios of Apameia FGrH 3.266): ...; the house was decorated with couches elaborately spread, with paintings and statues and display of silver vessels. From it he emerged trailing a white riding-cloak, his finger encircled with a ring of gold with the portrait of Mithridates upon it; ...*

### Epigraphic sources

#### Delos

- *IDelos 1560. Circular statue base? (genitive case) erected by Dionysios from Athens for Mithridates and his younger brother Mithridates Chrestos.*
- *IDelos 1563. Statue base erected by Helianax in 102-101 BC in the monument for Mithridates on Mt. Kynthos. A headless statue possibly belonging to this base was found in the vicinity (see below).*

- *IDelos* 1565. Statue base? (genitive case). Monument described by Cyriacus of Ancona.
- *IDelos* 1568. Statue base found in the Asklepieion.

#### Nymphaion

- *SEG* 37, 668. Statue base.

#### Possible headless statues of Mithridates

- Delos, Monument for Mithridates erected by the priest Helianax from Athens on Mt. Kynthos in 102-101 BC. Cuirassed statue with paludamentum (Fig. 15) that possibly belongs to the base mentioned above (*IDelos* 1563).<sup>36</sup> This portrait statue of Mithridates probably stood in the cella. Another portrait may have been inserted in the medallion set in the pediment.<sup>37</sup>
- Melos. A colossal statue of a draped figure possibly Dionysos has been suggested to have carried a portrait of Mithridates VI, but no significant evidence has been brought forward to support the proposal.<sup>38</sup>

#### Cameos and intaglios

Portraits on cameos and intaglios constitute a particular problem in relation to the portraits of Mithridates. First of all, no one has yet tried to compile this diffuse material. Secondly, there is generally a surprisingly low correlation between Hellenistic royal portraits on coins and on gems.<sup>39</sup> Gems belonged in the context of court art and, contrary to the public images, did not need to



Fig. 15. Delos, Sanctuary of the Kabeiroi. Base for Mithridates VI and headless statue shortly after the excavation.



Fig. 16. Gem in the British Museum with portrait comparable to the portraits on the later tetradrachms (after Walters 1926, no. 1228).

be easily recognizable. It is therefore extremely difficult to define what constitutes portraits and what constitutes images of divinities. Take, for example, Vollenweider's catalogue of the gems in Paris. Here no less than eight gems are said to carry representations of Mithridates, only one of which bears any resemblance to the coin portraits. The others depict children or divinities, particularly Dionysos.<sup>40</sup> Obviously there are also gems that have significance for the iconography of Mithridates. Examples include a gem from Pantikapaion,<sup>41</sup> a layered sardonyx,<sup>42</sup> a glass paste<sup>43</sup> all in St. Petersburg, State Hermitage Museum, a gem in Paris,<sup>44</sup> and finally a gem in the British Museum, which is clearly dependent on the second portrait type of Mithridates (Fig. 16).<sup>45</sup>

Much more work needs to be done with this material before their value for the iconography of Mithridates can be accessed properly.

Mithridates seem to have been a collector of gems himself. His collection ended up in Rome among the spoils of war taken by Pompeius. Pliny was, however, not too impressed by (the remains of) it (*HN* 37.11).

## Notes

- 1 Schwarzenberg 1967, 59-118.
- 2 Lorenz 2001, 65-79.
- 3 Andreae 1994-1995, 111-122; 1997, 395-416.
- 4 Callataj 1997, 28.
- 5 Just. *Epit.* 38.4-7.
- 6 For previous work on the iconography of Mithridates, see Kleiner 1952, 73-95, Neverov 1971, 86-95, and Smith 1988, 99-100.
- 7 For the problem of inconsistent iconographies among Hellenistic ruler portraits, see Smith 1988, 27-31.
- 8 Callataj 1997, 23-24, 43.
- 9 Callataj 1997, 33-36; Pfeiler 1968, 75-80.
- 10 Perseus/pilei, Perseus/Pegasos, Athena/Perseus, Perseus/harpa. See Imhoof-Blumer 1912, 169-192; Callataj 2005, 119-136; Callataj 2007, 271-308.
- 11 For a discussion of the emblem, see Summerer 1995, 305-314.
- 12 Fleischer 2002, 68-70.
- 13 Callataj 1997, 52.
- 14 The earliest dated instance is the inscription on the monument of Helianax (*IDelos*, 1562), but the identification with Dionysos may be significantly earlier than this. However, the epithet is not used in the decree for Diophantos (*IOSPE I<sup>2</sup>*, 352) from 114 BC or shortly thereafter.
- 15 Dionysos/cista mystica, panther/cista mystica, Dionysos/thyrsos. See Imhoof-Blumer 1912, 169-192; Callataj 2005, 119-136; Callataj 2007, 271-308.

- 16 Callataÿ 1997, 111. Note, however, McGing (2000, 375-382) for the opposite view.
- 17 First published as Mithridates VI by Winter (1894, 245-248).
- 18 Oikonomides 1962, 13-15.
- 19 Hafner 1954, 45-47.
- 20 Akurgal & Budde 1956, Taf. XIV; Summerer 1999, 131-132.
- 21 Trejster, Dmitriev & Malyžev 1998, 160-173; Trejster, Dmitriev & Malyshev 1999, 487-507.
- 22 Krahmer 1925, 183-205.
- 23 Hintzen-Bohlen 1990, 145-156.
- 24 Nemirov 1972, 110-118.
- 25 Nemirov 1972, 110-118.
- 26 Calza 1964, 21, no. 12, pl. 7. The portrait from Ostia is now in Frascati.
- 27 Athens NM 3556. Schrader 1896, 281-283; Fleischer 2002, 69.
- 28 Athens NM 429. Michalowski 1932, 5-8.
- 29 Paris Louvre MA 855.
- 30 Delos Museum A 4184. Will 1955, 172-176 & pl. 15, who identified the portrait as Demetrios Poliorketes.
- 31 Krug 1969, 189-195.
- 32 Zin'ko (ed.) 2004, 185, no. 119 (head) and possibly p. 218, no. 151 (arm).
- 33 State Hermitage Museum, inv. no. ПАН 1726; Vostchinina 1974, 194-196, no. 80.
- 34 Anochin 1986, 145, no. 201.
- 35 The literary sources for the portrait of Mithridates were first collected by Reinach 1895, 283.
- 36 Delos Museum no. A 4173. Marcadé (1969) argues against this identification on the basis of the poor joining of the plinth and the cutting in the base.
- 37 Chapouthier 1935, 35-36. Although the reconstruction proposed, somewhat surprisingly, rather points to an associate of Mithridates VI from Amisos.
- 38 Triante 1998, 167-175.
- 39 Smith 1988, 12.
- 40 Vollenweider 1995, 187-201, nos. 207, 208, 215, 216, 217, 218, 219, 221. See also Vollenweider 1988, 266-268.
- 41 Nemirov 1968, 235-238; 1973, 41-45.
- 42 Furtwängler 1900, 158, pl. 32, no. 17. Layered sardonyx in St. Peterburg, State Eremitage Museum.
- 43 Neverov 1969, 172-175.
- 44 Vollenweider 1995, 198, no. 218.
- 45 Walters 1926, no. 1228. Transparent yellowish-green paste.

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**Abbreviations**

*IDelos* A. Plassart, F. Durrbach et al. 1926-1972. *Inscriptions de Délos* 1-7. Paris.

*IOSPE* B. Latyshev 1885-1916. *Inscriptiones antiquae orae septentrionalis Ponti Euxini Graecae et Latinae*. Vol. 1<sup>2</sup>. Petropolis (reprint Hildesheim 1965).