

Characteristics of the Temple States in Pontos

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This study discusses temples belonging to gods of Persian and Anatolian origin in the Pontic Kingdom, which are distinguished from other temples because of their self-governing capabilities. These temples have sometimes been called “temple states” because they were self-governing units with their own authority, territories and revenues. There has been controversy over the issue of finding a proper term for these entities in Anatolia and they have been identified as both states and estates. The aim of this paper will be to introduce these structures and to offer possible explanations regarding their nature and function within the Hellenistic Kingdom of Mithridates.

The problem of terminology is not new as Strabon uses various terms to explain these unusual entities. At Ameria, for example, there was a community of sorts, which Strabon characterized as a “village city” (κωμόπολις).¹ This term was probably used to describe a village of considerable dimensions. As well, Strabon states that Zela under the kings was ruled as a “sacred precinct”,² while he uses the term *polis* with regard to Komana Pontike.

Introduction

Temple states are basically economically independent religious entities with self-governing powers. Their independent economy and autonomy differentiate temple states from other temples. It has been suggested that the phenomenon of temple states first emerged in Mesopotamia. The term temple state was originally suggested by Anton Deimel to describe temple centred authorities, and he also stated that the religious activity of the Sumerians was centred on these temple states.³ The main purpose of these Mesopotamian temple states was to organize the population to ensure efficient irrigation and agricultural activity on the temple property.⁴ Virgilio implies that temple states had developed complex systems of governing religious, political and economic affairs.⁵ According to Virgilio, there was a temple at the centre of the temple state’s religious, political and economic structure with long traditions and strong connections with the village, city or the state where it was located.⁶

The Anatolian examples were certainly not identical to the Mesopotamian ones since the conditions that shaped their development must have been vastly

different. Also there seems to have been a huge difference in the system of governance.

The first signs of temple states in Anatolia can be seen during the Hittite period. The area known as Komana Pontike in the Roman period was in fact the area named Kummami in the Hittite period. In this area, there was a temple dedicated to Ma in the Roman period and this same area was also the site of a temple dedicated to Hapat in the Hittite period. The religious centre and the most sacred area of the Kingdom of Kizzuwatna were likewise here. In this period temple states were not fully autonomous but had their own governmental structures.⁷ They were under the authority of the king and controlled by the Hittite governors. Other important cult centres of the Hittites were Zippalanda, Karahla, and Šamuha. These cult centres held festivals as one of their main official activities and these festivals were an important aspect of Hittite religious life. Festivals were the most important social occasion when extensive offerings were made to the gods. We also see that crown princes were assigned to serve as priests. The assignment of Hattušili III, the son of Mursili, to Šamuha where the god Ištar was worshipped can be seen as an example for this.⁸

Examples of temple states also appeared in Egypt. Well-designed land management systems have been observed in registrations of land divisions between royal, private, and sacred owners. A huge amount of land in Egypt belonged to the temples in the pre-Ptolemaic period. These lands were considered the estates of deities and the gains from these lands were considered sacred revenue.⁹ The Ptolemies probably took over this organization when they took power and they essentially left it unchanged.¹⁰ M. Rostovtzeff stated that, Seleukid Syria and Mesopotamia housed various temple states such as those in the interior of Asia Minor. According to him, these temple states, places like Baitokaike or Bambyke, were reorganized and received new names under the Seleukids.¹¹

The origin of the temple states of the Hellenistic period in Anatolia may possibly be traced back to the Hittite period, but the supposition certainly requires further investigation. To understand the temple states of Anatolia, three components need clarification: 1) The area around the temple providing revenues for it, called the temple territory, 2) the number of people working for and living around the temple, called sacred slaves (*hierodouloi*), 3) the role of the religious leader, called the priest.

Territories and revenues of temple states

The temple territories probably included lands belonging to the independent native population. Territories from villages, unions of villages and tribes were added to the temple lands.¹² Temple territories and their inhabitants (sacred slaves) whose sole role was to work for the temple, provided these temple

states with the resources necessary for their development. According to M. Rostovtzeff: “the territory and hierarchy of great, wealthy and influential sanctuaries that had many priests, impressive architecture and thousands of people who worked to serve were similar to that of a state”.¹³

It is most unfortunate that we have very little information about the temple states and their conditions during the Mithridatic era. Most of what we do have derives from the later author Strabon. The usual characteristics of a temple state can be determined from the testimony of Strabon describing Komana Pontike. In his testimony, Strabon states that although the inhabitants of the city were subjects of the king in general, they were in fact subjects of the priest in many respects. According to Strabon, the priest ruled over the temple and the temple servants, and he had control over the revenues gained from the temple territories.¹⁴

After the defeat of Mithridates, Pompeius rearranged the sacred lands of Komana, Ameria, and Zela. Zela's borders were for example extended and it was transformed into a *polis*.¹⁵ In Komana, the Romans assigned priests to control the lands. Its border was expanded to such an extent that it encompassed an area that extended northwards to Magnopolis and Kabeira. Towards Zela and Megalopolis other additions were made to the territory. The priest Lykomedes who was known to be closely associated with the Romans was influential in this increase of territory.¹⁶

In Strabon's description of Morimene in Kappadokia we come across information concerning the temple revenues. He states that in Venesa (Avanos) there was a temple of the Venesian Zeus, which had almost three thousand temple-servants and a sacred territory that was very productive, leaving the priest a yearly revenue of fifteen talents.¹⁷ The increase in temple territories tempted some administrators to plunder the temple revenues. Strabon's account of Zela mentions such violations and the resulting reduction of the importance of the temple:

The large number of temple-servants and the honours of the priests were, in the time of the kings, of the same type as I have stated before, but at the present time everything is in the power of Pythodoris. Many persons had abused and reduced both the multitude of temple-servants and the rest of the resources of the temple (Strab. 12.3.37; Loeb translation).

The vast amounts of capital under divine protection caused the temples to play an important role in the economic life of the area. The revenue and taxes collected from the sacred territories and money deposited in these well-protected temples became a source for loans to both communities and individuals.¹⁸ There were many “temple banks” functioning in a similar way in Asia Minor.¹⁹

Priesthood

Priests were responsible for the administration of the temples and they came only second in rank after the king. The priest of Ma in Komana Pontike, for example, wore a diadem during the two annual *exoduses* of the goddess and came after the king in the hierarchy.²⁰ Therefore, it is not surprising to discover that the priesthood was a gift from the king. Dorylaos, who was a distant relative of Strabon, was given the title of high priest by Mithridates Eupator.²¹ There exists unfortunately no other information concerning the priests of the temples during the rule of the Mithridatids.

According to an inscription recorded by Waddington in Kappadokian Komana, a priest is identified also as a *Kataonian Strategos*.²² This means that the priest also had a role in governing.²³ The priest was responsible for the territory belonging to the temple and its collected revenue. Six thousand temple slaves from both genders were subject to the priest and the revenues gained from the temple territories were at the disposal of the priests. The priest, however, had no right to sell these temple slaves.²⁴ In the Roman period the priests were appointed by the Roman authorities.²⁵

Sacred slaves (hierodouloi)

One of the important components of the temple states were the sacred slaves (*hierodouloi*). In Strabon, the size and importance of temples were explained in terms of the number of *hierodouloi* inhabiting the territory.²⁶ Although sacred slaves were under the priest's authority, they belonged to the temple and the priest could not sell them. The best source of information and the most detailed record explaining the status and rights of the *hierodouloi* is an inscription set up by Antiochos I of Kommagene.²⁷ This document stresses the inviolability and protected status of the sacred slaves.

Apart from the sacred slaves, sacred prostitution was also important for the temples. In Strabon we come across some passages discussing the position of temple-prostitutes especially in temples dedicated to Anaitis and Ma.²⁸ While describing the city of Komana Pontike, he mentions that here was a multitude of women who made gain from their persons; most of them are dedicated to goddess.²⁹ These women dedicated to the goddess Ma, were probably prostitutes.³⁰ Furthermore, in his accounts on the sacred territory of Akilisene in Armenia, he relates that the daughters of Armenian nobleman offered their virginity to Anaitis as temple prostitutes.³¹ Herodotos likewise records sacred prostitution in Lydia³² and he mentions a similar structure in Babylonia organized for the goddess Mylitta (Aphrodite).³³

Deities and temples

When we shift back to the religious aspect of the temple states it is apparent that Anaitis, Ma and Men must have been very important for Pontos in general. The kings of Pontos evoked Men Pharnakou in the royal oath.³⁴ In particular, the Persian deities had importance for the official religious policies of the Mithridatic kings.³⁵

Zela and Anaitis

Anaitis was worshipped in Zela and the importance of Zela for the kingdom of Pontos was great. Sacred rites performed here were characterized by greater sanctity and it is here that all the people of Pontos made their oaths concerning matters of the greatest importance.³⁶ The temple of Anaitis and her altar shared with Omanes and Anadates were also respected by the Armenians, because the great goddess of Armenia was also Anahit or Anaitis. She had a temple at Eriza and the entire region of Akilisene was called Anaitike.³⁷ Anahita is well-known as a goddess of water and fertility.

The temple at Zela was dedicated to Anaitis and built probably in the late Achaemenid period, the 4th century BC.³⁸ The worship of the goddess Anaitis was first introduced to Asia Minor in the 6th century BC both officially and by private individuals.³⁹ It is possible that the temple was developed in time by the Pontic kings.

Our main source of information on the temple to Anaitis in Zela comes from coinage minted during the Roman Imperial period.⁴⁰ The temple was probably a hexastyle and founded on a low hill.⁴¹ Following the re-organization of Pompeius, Zela was transformed into a city by the addition of new territories and buildings. On the north-east side of the hill, where the temple stood, a small theatre was built partly of stone and partly of wood. The hill itself was carved out and included in the structure. The only remains of the theatre today are some seats carved out of the bedrock and some structures belonging to the orchestra. Other remains of the city include a tomb and some architectural fragments.⁴²

Strabon indicated that rituals held in Zela possessed great sanctity, and a traditional festival was celebrated only once a year.⁴³ We understand from Strabon that the temple in Zela was built to celebrate the defeat of the Sakai by Kyros. A festival was also organized for celebrating this defeat and it was named Sakaia.⁴⁴ Strabon indicates that this festival was a kind of Bacchic festival where: "men dressed in the Scythian garb, pass day and night drinking and playing wantonly with one another, and also with the women who drink with them".⁴⁵ This festival was also celebrated wherever a temple of Anaitis was present. From Strabon's statements on the subject, it may be suggested that this festival was Persian in origin. Also from his statements it might be possible to deduce that the temple of Anaitis was established under the rule of the Persians.

Strabon states that in earlier times, kings had ruled Zela not as a city but as a sacred precinct to the Persian goddess. A priest ruled over the whole area. This sacred territory housed many temple-servants and priests.⁴⁶ These characteristic of the organization of Zela show many similarities to Strabon's account of Komana's organization.

Komana Pontike and Ma

The account of the temple state of Komana Pontike shows that it also functioned as a busy market place for the people from Armenia. Komana Pontike is located near Yeşilirmak (Iris) River on a hill today called Hamamtepe situated 9 km northeast of Tokat on the Tokat-Niksar and Tokat-Almus highways.⁴⁷ The territory of Komana lay along the Iris, which provided both agricultural land and a means of communication with Armenia and with other cities of Pontos. Komana Pontike was a large and significant religious centre, located at an important crossroad on a dense trade network. It owed some of its significance to being the closest trade centre to Armenia Minor.

Inscriptions from Komana throw some light on the history of this temple state. A Roman bridge connected the hill, with the other bank of the river. A few courses of masonry with two re-used inscribed blocks on one of the pillars are still visible in the modern construction of the water regulator. One is still clearly visible during times of low water levels. From this inscription, dated to 161-169 AD,⁴⁸ we understand that the city of Komana had the right of "asylum".⁴⁹ Another important inscription was found by Wilson in 1958.⁵⁰ The inscription was placed on three architrave blocks of grey marble. This inscription states that the city of Komana had the rights of "sacred and inviolable" or "ἱερά καὶ ἄσυλος" in the early second century AD.⁵¹ The right of asylum was more an indication of the prestige of a sanctuary than of the importance of the city linked with it.⁵² It was not common practice for the Hellenistic kings to award this title. The title was probably not decided upon by a single king and it did not come from one authority. It was rather Greek public opinion that determined this and once given the title meant that its recipient was held as the highest source of law for deciding upon questions of civic status and entitlements in the Greek world.⁵³ For the Romans however, the title "sacred and inviolable" meant "the right of asylum", or refuge and immunity from the law, and was viewed with suspicion.

One of the most important temples of the Kingdom of Pontos was at Komana and was dedicated to the goddess Ma.⁵⁴ It was possibly surrounded by the royal fortresses, and was a town in which the servants of the goddess and the priests lived. As we can see by looking at the coinage, the temple was tetrastyle.⁵⁵ Six thousand sacred slaves were dedicated to the service of Ma by taking oaths and these worked the fields of the temple's sacred territory.⁵⁶ Festivals dedicated to Ma promoted trade and prosperity, and the female

prostitutes attached to the temple gave Komana the reputation of a minor Korinthos (Strab. 12.3.36).

The first appearance of the goddess of Ma in Anatolia is unknown.⁵⁷ Due to her warlike characteristics, the goddess Ma has been identified with Enyo and Bellona.⁵⁸ Ma carried the epithet of “invincible” and “goddess of victory” in Kappadokian Komana and in various inscriptions.⁵⁹ Strabon described the temple of Enyo in Komana Kappadokia as: “In this Antitaurus are deep and narrow valleys, in which are situated Comana and the temple of Enyo, whom the people there call Ma”.⁶⁰ On the coinage minted in Komana Pontike during the reigns of Caligula, Trajan and Septimius Severus we see that Ma is depicted holding a spear and a shield.⁶¹

Ameria and Men Pharnakou

The last temple state in Pontos was located near Kabeira (Kabeira was turned into a city by Pompeius called Diospolis). The “village city (κωμόπολιν) Ameria” in Kabeira hosted the temple of Men Pharnakou and the temple had many temple servants and the revenue from its sacred territory was controlled by the priest.⁶² According to Strabon this place was important for the Pontic Kingdom because kings of Pontos took their royal oath here as follows: “By the Fortune of the king and by Men Pharnaces”.⁶³ Worship of Men in Anatolia during the Phrygian period was very common. According to A. Erzen, the name Men does not come from Greek or Phrygian. The evidence rather points to a Hittite origin as a Moon god.⁶⁴ According to Lane there is an iconographic similarity between the Iranian Moon-divinity Mao and Men.⁶⁵ Men is mentioned in numerous Lydian inscriptions together with Artemis Anaitis, Thea Anaitis or Megale Anaitis.

On this basis it can be suggested that the Pontic Kingdom had had a strong Persian influence and the temple of Men Pharnakou is probably a reference to the reputed forefather of the Mithridatids Pharnakes, husband of Atossa, Kyros’ maternal aunt.⁶⁶

Conclusion

The origin of the concept of temple states in Anatolia is unknown. The records from the Hittite period indicate the existence of temple-centred administrations in Anatolia. However, this was not a system where the temple had full governmental power. Instead perhaps it was a variation of systems that changed through time. Our knowledge about the temple states in Pontos belongs to the Roman period so it is difficult to understand their earlier form. Although the concept of temple state derived from Mesopotamia, the temple states of Anatolia were administratively part of the Hittite state.

Later the Romans reorganized these native communities and transformed the temple states into *poleis*. The transformation of temple states with large

territories into cities by the Romans was an approach dependent upon the local situation. The local authority in Pontos that flourished under the Pontic Kingdom diminished when the province was re-organized by Pompeius. This re-organization included the transformation of settlements into cities and additions of territories. However, the organization differed depending on local conditions in the different cities and regions. Komana Pontika and Zela demonstrate these differences. The autonomy of the temple state in Komana Pontike and its territory was initially preserved, possibly in respect of its great sanctity and prestige. In fact, Komana was enlarged by the addition of new territories and given the right of *asylia*. However, the priest was appointed by the Romans. Zela, on the other hand, was transformed into a *polis* by Pompeius. This raises some questions about Pompeius' policy. Why did Zela not preserve its autonomy? Did Pompeius want to abolish the strong Persian elements in the cult at Zela, which were also an integrated part of the recently defeated kingdom?

Our main source, Strabon, is not sufficient to clarify the issue of temple states or estates. The term *κωμόπολις* used for describing Ameria seem to indicate that the village located near the temple became dependent on the city, while the term *ἱερός* used for Zela denotes a sacred territory or in other words a temple estate.⁶⁷ Finally Strabon simply calls Komana an *ἐμπόριον*. Surely these terms were coined after the reorganisation by the Romans. Their vagueness has given rise to discussions about the state or estate nature of these communities.

The concept of temple states varies according to both the region and period under consideration. For this reason, the term "temple state" should be re-conceptualized by considering the estate issue of temples. Our information about the state structures, like Zela and Komana Pontike, mainly derives from Roman sources but new archaeological studies may possibly be helpful in understanding their components and functions in the interior of Anatolia.

Notes

- 1 Strab. 12.2.6.
- 2 Strab. 12.3.37.
- 3 Foster 1981, 226.
- 4 Foster 1981, 227. Rostovtzeff also mentions that the management of the agricultural activities was viewed as a privilege in Ptolemaic Egypt and organized by the priests (Rostovtzeff 1941, 275).
- 5 Virgilio 1981, 49.
- 6 Virgilio 1981, 49.
- 7 Boffo 1985, 15.
- 8 Alp 2001, 141.
- 9 Rostovtzeff 1941, 280.
- 10 Rostovtzeff 1941, 281.
- 11 Rostovtzeff 1941, 511.

- 12 Broughton 1938, 641.
- 13 Rostovtzeff 1941, 505.
- 14 Strab. 12.3.37.
- 15 Strab. 11.8.4.
- 16 Strab. 12.3.34.
- 17 Strab. 12.2.6.
- 18 Magie 1950, 142.
- 19 For references to all “temple banks” in Anatolia, see Magie 1950, 142.
- 20 Strab. 12.3.32. Cumont (1918, 312) stated that the priest most probably had a guard of *doryphores*, while Fishwick (1967, 152) thought that the *doryphores* were the predecessors of the *hastiferi*, whom one should consider as guards of the goddess herself rather than of the priest.
- 21 Strab. 12.3.33.
- 22 Waddington 1883, 127; Strab. 12.1.2.
- 23 Boffo claimed that the priest had authority in local policy. This also relates to the throne-priest among the Hittites. To the Achemenids, “second in rank” implies a religious class in politics (Boffo 1985, 21).
- 24 Strab. 12.3.34.
- 25 Strab. 12.3.34.
- 26 Strab. 12.3.34; Rostovtzeff (1941, 280) claimed that all of the inhabitants of a temple state were counted as slaves of gods without regard to their professions. Minor priests such as keepers and feeders of sacred animals were also called *hierodouloi*.
- 27 Dörrie 1964, 85.
- 28 Strab. 11.14.16.
- 29 Strab. 12.3.36.
- 30 Detailed information for the institution of sacred prostitution see Beard & Henderson 1997, 480-503.
- 31 Strab. 11.14.16.
- 32 Hdt. 1.93-94.
- 33 Hdt. 1.199.
- 34 Strab. 12.3.31.
- 35 Mitchell 2002, 59
- 36 Strab. 12.3.37.
- 37 Russell 1990, 2682.
- 38 Boyce & Grenet 1991, 288.
- 39 In Anatolia, the cult of Anaitis can be identified with the cults of Artemis Anaitis and Artemis Persike (Corsten 1991, 164).
- 40 Price & Trelle 1977, 102.
- 41 Wilson 1960, 215.
- 42 Wilson 1960, 215.
- 43 Strab. 11.8.5.
- 44 For the origin of the name of the Sacae and similar festivals, see Athenaeus 14.639; Boyce & Grenet 1991, 290.
- 45 Strab. 11.8.5. Loeb translation.
- 46 Strab. 11.8.4.
- 47 The survey conducted by D. Burcu Erciyas in 2004 gives the first precise archaeological information about the settlement, see “www.comanaproject.org”.

However, the survey has not been able to locate the exact place where the temple stood.

- 48 *IGR* III, 106.
 49 Ramsay 1882, 153. Ramsay also mentioned another inscription from Komana, which honours two consuls. Here the name of Hierokaisareia was given for Komana. The date of the inscription according to the local era is 103, which corresponds to the year 140 AD (*IGR* III, 105). Another inscription recorded by Reinach mentions that the councils of Komana and Neokaisareia honour the son of the archpriest Scribonius Pius (*IGR* III, 107).
 50 Wilson, 1960, 233; for this inscription by the people of Komana honouring to the Emperor Trajan, see Rémy & Özcan, 1992, 119-124.
 51 *SEG* 42, 339.
 52 Broughton 1938, 710.
 53 Rigsby 1996, 78.
 54 For adopting the cult from Komana Kappadokia, see Strab. 12.3.32.
 55 Amandry & Rémy 1999, pl. 2-7.
 56 Strab. 12.3.34.
 57 For the origin of the name of Ma, see Çapar 1995, 584; *SEG* 45, 187.
 58 Çapar 1995, 584.
 59 The inscriptions recorded by Waddington in Kataonia enlighten us about the epithets of the goddess (Waddington 1883, 127).
 60 Strab. 12.2.3. Loeb translation.
 61 Amandry & Rémy 1999, pl. 2.
 62 Strab. 12.3.31.
 63 Strab. 12.3.31. Loeb translation.
 64 Erzen 1953, 5.
 65 Lane 1990, 2170.
 66 Lane 1990, 2171.
 67 Strab. 12.3.37.

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