

Bosporos under the Rule of Mithridates VI Eupator

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In the present paper I aim to investigate a single question in Bosporan history: the status of Bosporos in the Pontic state under the rule of Mithridates VI. Bosporos was incorporated into the Pontic Kingdom after the defeat of the Scythians under Saumakos in about 107/6 BC. Undoubtedly, the Scythian riot together with the death of the last Spartokid king changed the presupposed conditions of this incorporation. After the crushing defeat, Bosporos could no longer aspire to the role of a vassal kingdom, as Orešnikov supposed,¹ and as the issue was probably resolved by negotiations with Pairisades V. Nor could it be a vice-kingdom, as Reinach believed.² Both variants overlook one major point – the king was under the control of Mithridates and at the same time enjoyed his confidence.

According to Šelov: “Bosporos, which was united with Pontos by a personal union, continued to be an isolated political unit; its head was a special governor-general appointed by the king, whose sons in turn took on this role”.³ Being too young, however, the sons of Mithridates could not have governed Bosporos immediately after its subjection. The earliest mention of the fact that Bosporos was governed by the sons of Mithridates belongs to 87/6 BC (Plut. *Sul.* 11). Moreover, this passage tells us about the governing of both Pontos and Bosporos.

Gajdukevič offers a different opinion viewing Bosporos as a province or a satrapy within the Pontic Kingdom.⁴ The absence of sources related specifically to this issue though leads us to a renewed examination of the arguments that have already been put forward by researchers and an analysis of new findings.

First, there is no document testifying to the fact that Bosporos was an isolated state within the Pontic kingdom. The people of Bosporos do not appear as a single unit in the troops of Mithridates or among his allies. In comparison, Lesser Armenia, for example, provided separate allied troops headed by Mithridates' son Arkathias during the First Mithridatic War. Apparently he was governing that state at that period of time (App. *Mith.* 17).⁵

Also, there are no sources which suggest that the governor-general of Bosporos, even if he was Mithridates' son, had special rights which distinguished him from other satraps. Furthermore, the first son of Mithridates who governed Bosporos and Pontos took this position only after Mithridates

had moved his residence to Pergamon. The names of the governor-generals of Bosporos, who held the post before this son of Mithridates, have not been preserved. Apparently, these governors were insignificant for maintaining the status of Bosporos as a state within Pontos. The fact that the “ancient possessions in Pontos and Bosporos” were governed by a single person (as stated by Justinus) prompts us to believe that Bosporos was not an isolated unit within the kingdom of Mithridates.

Some indirect evidence proving the political status of Bosporos can be derived from the terminology used by ancient authors and in inscriptions. There is no document contemporary to Mithridates, in which he is called the king of Bosporos. Taking into account the frequent references to the hereditary nature of his power, this could seem odd. However, it only appears odd, as all the terms defining the kind of power the king of Pontos had over Bosporos emphasize its absolute and indivisible nature.

For instance, while speaking about the subjection of Bosporos, Strabon calls Mithridates “master (κύριος) of Bosporos” (7.4.3). This term stresses that the king wielded absolute power. However, it does not define this power’s political status.⁶ In the decree in honour of Diophantos⁷ and in the honorary inscription under the statue of Mithridates in Nymphaion,⁸ the power of the king of Pontos over Bosporos is defined by the term *πράγματα*. This term does not allow us to make any conclusions concerning the degree of isolation of Bosporos within Pontos. However, the comparison of these two documents does give us some ground for estimating the status of Bosporos within Pontos.

In the decree of the Chersonesians, Mithridates is called a “king” whereas in the inscription from Nymphaion he is called the “king of kings”. The chronological gap between these documents is not large. The statue of Mithridates must have been erected in Nymphaion soon after the victories of Neoptolemos in about 106/5 BC.⁹ Consequently, it was the subjection of Bosporos that provided the reason for including both his hereditary title (the King of Lesser Armenia) and the names of defeated enemies (Kolchis, Scythians and Bosporos) in the full title. Knowing that after its military subjection Kolchis was governed by a governor-general chosen by Mithridates from among his “friends” (Strab. 11.2.18), we can suppose that Bosporos was governed in a similar way. However, in an administrative respect Bosporos, unlike Kolchis, was not an isolated political unit but a new formation united with Chersonesos, a certain part of Scythia, and newly subjected tribes in Asia. Proof can be found in Strabon’s notation that the inhabitants of Taurika and the areas near Sindika paid tribute to the King of Pontos (7.4.6). Apparently, Pantikapaion became the center of this new province although there is no direct reference to this fact in the sources.

As Bosporos became an integral part of Pontos it became necessary to adjust its state system to the system of governing and law-making used in Pontos. According to the sources changes were made to various elements of

the former state system of Bosporos. In the subsequent history of Bosporos two new factors in its political life were of major significance. First, classical *polis* institutions (the council and the people) appeared; these were mentioned in the inscriptions from Gorgippia¹⁰ and Phanagoria.¹¹ These institutions are typical of Hellenistic city-states and Ju.G. Vinogradov believes that this and other acts of Mithridates denote the beginning of Hellenism in Bosporos.¹²

There was however a second factor which contradicted the traditions of Hellenistic states – the restoration of the home guard in the cities of Bosporos. Such military forces were placed in Olbia¹³ and Chersonesos¹⁴ as well as in Bosporos. This seems to contradict the policy of Mithridates, as the cities in his patrimonial kingdom according to Reinach and Griffith had long ceased to use such forces.¹⁵ In my opinion, however, Mithridates did not alter his views in this case but restored home guard in the cities of Bosporos after having evaluated the political situation in the region. On the one hand, the military campaign of Saumakos demonstrated the strong power of the barbarian (Scythian)¹⁶ element among the *chora* population on the European side of the Bosporos. This was the main element, which constituted the army of mercenaries belonging to the last Spartokids.¹⁷ The populations of the Greek cities, which were friendly to Pontos, could not withstand this army, as they did not have their own military forces.

On the other hand, the borders of Bosporos, which were constantly under attack, demanded better protection. In this connection the question of the correlation of the king's military forces in Bosporos with the home guard is of interest. The only direct source regarding this question is the decree in honour of the mercenaries of Mithridates from Phanagoreia, which dates from the year 210 according to the Pontic calendar (September 88-August 87 BC). A brilliant analysis of this decree was presented by Ju.G. Vinogradov.¹⁸ From his point of view, the mercenaries were a limited military force that the city of Phanagoreia had at its disposal and paid directly from its treasury. The number of these mercenaries was not large. The decree was adopted with the aim of granting civic rights to the mercenaries instead of paying them, as after the defeat of Mithridates' army in Greece in 87 BC, the king of Pontos had to increase the rate of the already huge tribute of Bosporos. Ju.G. Vinogradov also draws our attention to the fact that the list of new citizens and the grant of the right to purchase land was absent from the published document, which is characteristic of similar documents from the Hellenic period. He explains this fact by stating that this decree was an excerpt from a more detailed document.¹⁹

It is important to note that the documents of the Pontic Kingdom contain no information about the king placing detachments of mercenaries at the disposal of cities. In every case these detachments were kept and financed by the king and their commanding officers were subject not to the city but to the king. On the northern Black Sea coast this was stated in an inscription from Olbia (*IOSPE I*², 35).²⁰ That is why the arguments put forward by Ju.G. Vinogradov and obviously testifying to the absence of power of Mithridates over Phana-

gorean mercenaries can have another interpretation. We have no information concerning the role of the cities of the Asian side of Bosphoros in the coup d'état of Saumakos, but we know that external threats continued along the eastern border of Bosphoros after the victories of Diophantos. This can be clearly seen in the fact that in a short period of time another commander of Mithridates, Neoptolemos, had to fight back the onslaught of barbaric tribes.

Consequently, the presence of the mercenaries of Mithridates in Phanagoreia and not on the battle-fields in Greece is not at all surprising. Until Sulla had captured Athens (1 March 86 BC) and defeated the army of Archelaos near Chaironeia and Orchomenos, there was no urgent need to withdraw regiments from Bosphoros or raise the *phoros* from the northern possessions. The phrases of the Phanagorean decree tell us that the mercenaries served *together with the citizens* (συνστρατεύσασθαι), performed their duty towards the city (πεποικέναι πᾶν τὸ δίκαιον) and were friendly towards *their city* (πρὸς τὴν ἑαυτῶν πόλιν). It can be viewed as a confirmation of the fact that the soldiers had implemented the order of the king to protect the city and to behave properly with regard to the citizens. Understanding the phrase "their city" as the object to be protected is only natural taking into account the type of document. Moreover, the city became "their city" only after the decree had been published. So such a meaning of this phrase may not have been implied.

Thus, the content of the decree suggests that the most likely situation was that the Phanagorean mercenaries (at least before they obtained Phanagorean citizenship) were subject to the king and received payment from the king's treasury. Furthermore, the fact that they served together with the citizens implies that the citizens were given orders by the leader of these mercenaries. It is necessary to specify the purpose of the decree's adoption. The opinion of Ju.G. Vinogradov, who believed that it was based on the desire of the Phanagoreians to cut expenses connected with the *phoros*, is basically justified. However, the increase of the *phoros* could be compensated by granting civic rights to the mercenaries only if the payment for keeping them was included in that *phoros*, i.e. the money collected in Taurika and Sindika was directly spent on payment to the soldiers of the Pontic army, who served in the cities of the northern Black Sea coast.

S.Ju. Saprykin is of the opinion that Strabon's report of the tribute to Mithridates relates solely to the last year of his reign;²¹ if he is right, the tribute was paid on only one occasion. However, reference to the term *phoros* (7.4.6) testifies to the fact that Strabon meant regular and most probably annual tribute.²² It is difficult to assess how difficult it was for the cities of Bosphoros to pay the tribute. A.A. Maslennikov believes that the 180.000 *medimnoi* of grain mentioned by Strabon could have been collected from the *chora* from one or two Bosporan cities.²³ If we take into account the growth of crafts and hunting in Bosphoros during the Hellenic period²⁴ and the increase of money circulation,²⁵ 200 talents should be viewed as a substantial amount but not

“unbelievably huge”. Undoubtedly, even the increase of this *phoros* could lead the citizens of Bosporos to look for more suitable ways of implementing the demands of the king of Pontos. Granting civic rights to mercenaries was a possible solution. It would be understandable and even natural if this method was used throughout Bosporos. However, we have a decree from only one of the cities and we do not know the degree of autonomy they had for taking such independent steps concerning the payment of *phoros*.

In my opinion, this situation must be connected with the subsequent attack of Bosporos on Mithridates. This attack was launched before the end of the First Mithridatic War to judge from the report of Appianos (App. *Mith.* 64), Mithridates began to prepare for a war with Bosporos immediately after its end. The term *Bosporanoi* used by Appianos in this case makes it clear that he mentioned the inhabitants of the Bosporan cities. If we compare the testimony of Appianos, Plutarch and Cicero concerning the attack of Bosporos with the testimony of the decree of Phanagoreians, it seems possible that Mithridates was attacked not by the whole of Bosporos but solely by its Asiatic part. What is more, this attack was apparently initiated and led by Phanagoreia. This is proved by the fact that the Phanagoreians granted civic rights to soldiers and particularly to those serving with them for a long time. Moreover, while giving them various privileges they established the main condition of their service – their taking part in general recruitment. An indirect proof of the special status of Phanagoreia within the new province and the risk of rebellion against Mithridates at that time can be seen in the actions of the King of Pontos. In 63 BC, planning an invasion of Italy, Mithridates placed a garrison in Phanagoreia (App. *Mith.* 108) and not in any other cities of the Asiatic side of Bosporos.

It can of course be supposed that what the Phanagoreians had in mind was improving the quality of their defences against the neighbouring barbarian tribes. This is less probable, however, as defence of the external borders of the province was the duty of the governor-general and not of each separate city. The governor-general being incapable of suppressing the riot of Phanagoreians, his place was taken by a more authoritative governor – Machares, the son of Mithridates. The possibility of a successful attack on the part of the Phanagoreians is directly connected with the quantity and quality of the military forces of Mithridates quartered in Bosporos.

The question remains: how many mercenaries operated in Phanagoreia and on the northern Black Sea coast in general? The absence of a list of new citizens in the Phanagoreian decree suggests, in my opinion, that their number was relatively high according to ancient standards. It can be derived from an Olbian decree in honour of an Amisean captain that the garrison sufficient for the defence of Olbia was transported on only one ship.²⁶ As we have no additional information about the size of this ship, we can suppose that it was an average trade ship, which could not have had more than 200 people on board.

Apparently, the garrison of Phanagoreia was not much larger. If we assume that the tribute of 200 talents mentioned by Strabon was used for keeping

the army of Pontos in the region and if we estimate the average daily payment to the mercenaries at 1 drachm, all the military forces of Pontos on the northern Black Sea coast will appear to have consisted of slightly more than 3000 people. The fact that these forces were sufficient to maintain the rule of the Pontic king is supported by the report of Strabon concerning the defeat of the Scythians and Roxolans by the army of Diophantos consisting of only 6000 soldiers. Moreover, it was reported by Josephus Flavius that the Roman supremacy on the Black Sea was maintained with 3000 legionaries and 40 ships (*Bell. Jud.* 2.16).²⁷ Judging from the number of buried treasures in the territory of the Asiatic side of Bosporos, the external threat to the new Pontic possessions was greatest there. It was there that the main forces of the Pontic military group had to be located. And it appears reasonable that they were won over to the side of Phanagoreians while the latter were planning an attack on the Pontic king.

It remains to be discussed why the Pontic mercenaries would have agreed to such an action. Upon assuming Phanagoreian citizenship, they might eventually have found themselves on the side of the enemies of Mithridates. Such a perspective would hardly have been acceptable for the natives of Pontos proper or other non-Bosporian regions, since this action would have put their relatives under threat of reprisals from the Pontic king, without any chance of defending them. It is most likely that the Phanagoreian mercenaries came from the Bosporan cities but did not possess full rights. Indeed, receiving full citizenship was an honour for them, especially in the context of the news concerning the defeats of Mithridates in his struggle against the Romans.

Thus we can say that after the establishment of the rule of Mithridates in Bosporos, the whole northern Pontic area was turned into a single administrative unit – a province of Pontos. It is most likely that Pantikapaion became its centre. This new part of the Pontic Kingdom was initially governed by a governor from among the king's "friends". Later, following the rebellion of the Bosporan people, Machares, the son of Mithridates, became the governor-general. A number of *polis* freedoms granted to the Greek cities of Bosporos are connected not only with the philhellenism of Mithridates, but with the desire of this Pontic king to standardize laws and strengthen the unity of the kingdom, as the Greek cities of Pontos itself already had the same privileges.

Notes

- 1 Orešnikov 1888, 100.
- 2 Reinach 1890, 221.
- 3 Šelov 1986, 567.
- 4 Gajdukevič 1955, 124.
- 5 Molev 1979, 186.
- 6 Gracianskaja 1988, 118-119.
- 7 *IOSPE* I², 352.

- 8 SEG 37, 668.
- 9 Molev 1980, 43-44; Vinogradov 1999, 18-19; Saprykin 1996, 149-151.
- 10 Saprykin 1986, 72.
- 11 Vinogradov 1991, 16.
- 12 Vinogradov 1993, 143.
- 13 Vinogradov 1989, 262.
- 14 IOSPE I², 352; Lomouri 1979, 147.
- 15 Reinach 1895, 254-271; Griffith 1933, 186.
- 16 Vinogradov 2000, 91-92.
- 17 Molev 1994, 124.
- 18 Vinogradov 1991, 14-33.
- 19 Vinogradov 1991, 30-31.
- 20 Molev 1976, 51-53; Vinogradov 1989, 252-254.
- 21 Saprykin 1995, 472.
- 22 Molev 1986, 177-178.
- 23 Maslennikov 1993, 391-394.
- 24 Šelov 1984, 182.
- 25 Molev 1994, 90-93.
- 26 IOSPE I², 35.
- 27 Rostovcev 1900, 140-159; Gajdukevič 1955, 89-90; Blavatskij 1985, 231.

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Abbreviations

- IOSPE B. Latyshev 1885-1916. *Inscriptiones antiquae orae septentrionalis Ponti Euxini Graecae et Latinae*. Petropolis (reprint Hildesheim 1965).