

The Bosporan Kings: Friends or Enemies of the Romans?

Roman influence in the Northern Black Sea is attested as early as 179 BCE when the city of Chersonesos and King Pharnakes I of Pontos embarked on an alliance only on condition that this would not affect their friendship with the Romans. However, the latter did not develop a sustained interest in the region before Mithradates VI of Pontos also became ruler of the (Kimmerian) Bosporos in 111. The annexed territory included the Eastern part of the Crimea and the Western part of the Taman peninsula. Over the next two decades, Mithradates conquered nearly the entire Black Sea coast. In 89/88, he fought and lost the First Mithradatic War with the Romans, accepting the *status quo ante bellum* after paying huge indemnities. Not much different was the outcome of the Second Mithradatic War by 80. The third war resulted in the loss of most of his possessions by 65. And yet Mithradates managed to escape to his Bosporan territory – only to be deposed by his son Pharnakes II. The latter was acknowledged by Pompey as a ‘friend and ally’ of the Romans, but his rule was restricted to the Bosporos, excluding Pontos.

From then on, the dynasty remained confined to its northern realm. Pharnakes’ attempt to regain Pontos when civil war broke out in Rome in 49 led to his defeat in 47. This notwithstanding, he withdrew from Asia having been re-instated as an official ‘friend of the Romans’, even though this did not help him much against the usurper Asandros, who soon took life and throne from him. However, by marrying into the family of Pharnakes, the usurper continued the dynastic line. Once more being tied up with a sequence of civil wars, the Romans preferred to re-establish ‘friendly relations’ with the most important force in the Black Sea, not only to enjoy the economic benefits, but also to avoid a power vacuum in the Bosporos.

After Augustus had established himself monarch of the Roman Empire (31/27), relations to the royal house of the Bosporos grew even closer. Highly indicative of the humble submission

to the Roman imperial family is the renaming of Pantikapaion and Phanagoreia as Kaisareia (after Caesar Augustus) and Agrippeia (after his son-in-law and deputy). Roman citizenship among the kings seems to go back to the Emperor Tiberius (14-37 CE), as is reflected in the first two names *Tiberius Claudius* that several kings bore henceforth. Tiberius Claudius Rhaskuporis I, the son of the usurper Kotys I and probably of Mithradatic descent himself, was appointed king by Vespasian (69-79 CE). His offspring lived on as ‘friends of the Roman people’ and as high priests of the cult for the Roman Emperor, until the Bosporos fell under the control of the Huns in the later-4th century CE.

The 19th-century paradigm that history is driven by rivalry between tribes and nations led to the assumption that major events around the Bosporos were determined by a lasting conflict between native Iranians and invading Greeks or oppressing Romans; this conflictual approach was cemented in the 20th century when Rome was regarded as a precursor of the imperialist West, at least in the eyes of Eastern European colleagues. Such ideological perspectives are still prevalent a quarter-century after the fall of the Iron Curtain. Heinz Heinen (1941-2013) was the first to systematically question those simplistic antagonisms. He repeatedly demonstrated that Bosporan rulers publicly displayed their affiliations with the imperial power to enhance their prestige among the locals, rather than to arouse their resentment. It is in this light that the history of the Bosporan Kingdom deserves to be revisited.

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