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The Pontic Kingdom Under Mithridates VI

Figure 1. The map of the Pontic Kingdom


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1. Historical overview of the origins of the Pontic Kingdom and the results of the rule of Mithridates VI

1.1. Brief characteristics of the Pontic Kingdom: geography, languages, religion

The Kingdom of Pontus was a Hellenistic state of Persian origin situated in the Eastern Asia Minor wasted by the Black Sea which played an extraordinary role in the Antique history between 302-64 BC. Its favorable geographical position (Fig. 1) remained an imprint on its history: based on the crossroads of important trade routes between Asia, the Balkans and the Black Sea region, having relations with rich countries of the Northern Mesopotamia, Caucasus, Iran and Black Sea region the Pontic Kingdom represented a vivid social, economic, ethnic, and cultural mixture of local Asia Minor, Anatolian, Iranian, and Hellenistic traditions. The northern border of Pontos was going through the southern coast of the Black Sea from the River Galis (modern Kizil-Irmak) up to the River Ofis (modern Ishtala-Dere). The River Ofis was the eastern border of Pontos and Chochis up to the River Lik in the south and the River Iris in the east crossing the River Galis. On the south the border of Pontus was expanding from the Mount Ak-Daga up to Gurlevik-Daga, then on south-western part the Pontic Kingdom was bordering on the Greater Cappadocia. Then the borderline was crossing the River Cappadox (modern Deliche Irmak), flowing into Galis.¹

According to B. C. McGing, “the Hellenistic Kingdom of Pontus which Mithridates Eupator inherited from his ancestors spanned much of the south coast of the Black Sea from Amastris in the west at least as far as Pharnaceia in the east. It was bounded inland by Paphlagonia and Galatia in the west, by Cappadocia in the south and by Armenia Minor in the east. Strabo gives its name as “Pontus” or “Cappadocia of the Pontus” while its neighbor to the south was known as “Cappadocia,” “Cappadocia on the Taurus” or “Greater Cappadocia.” Both Cappadocias had been satrapies of the Persian

¹ S. Ju. Saprykin, Pontijskoe carstvo (The Kingdom of Pontus), (Moskva, 1996).
Empire but became independent kingdoms in the Hellenistic age. Pontus was situated in a remote area on the edge of the Greek and Roman world and was divided into two distinct parts—a narrow coastal plain and a mountainous inland region. Communication between the two parts was made very difficult by the steeply rising range of the Pontic Alps which runs parallel to the coast and close to it, leaving the coastal plain only a few miles wide in many places. The capital and one of the main cities was Sinope which due to its harbour and central position on the south shore of the Black Sea was the most prosperous important trading center of that coast.”

Despite the fact that Pontic Kingdom was a multiethnic state, Greek was the official language of the Kingdom, with other languages spoken such as Persian, Paphlagonian, Phrygian, Galatian, Armenian, and Lycian. The religion of Pontos was syncretic, incorporating Greek polytheism with Anatolian and Persian gods.2

1.2. The origins of the dynasty of Mithridatides

Saprykin, states that the question of the origin of the dynasty of Mithridatides has a major meaning in the history of the Pontic Kingdom. Although the research of this topic is aggravated by contradictions of the ancient tradition and sometimes totally opposite conclusions of the researchers. The earliest literary evidence was offered by Polybius who says that the king Mithridates III (220-185 BC) states that he originates from one of the “seven Persians” and in another source he states that Mithridatides originated from one of the Persian kings. Appian performs very important statements, saying characterizing Mithridates VI Eupator as the representative of the 16th generation of the predecessors of Darius I and the 8th generation of Mithridates Cistis. Plutarch states that Mithridates, the son of Ariobarzan, became the founder of the Pontic Kingdom and the dynasty of Pontic kings. Thus, all of the mentioned ancient authors agree to the idea that the dynasty of Mithridatides was of Persian origin. The

difficulties in this research are represented by the fact that there are numerous legends about the origin of the dynasty which were often created in order to justify the rule of Mithridatides in Cappadocia and therefore were widely used by Mithridates VI Eupator in order to support his expansion in the Asia Minor.

Having analyzed the data offered by Saprykin,3 we can conclude that the first known member Mithridates I of Cius who was followed by his son Mithridates II of Cius. Mithridates II’s son, also called Mithridates, would become Mithridates I Ktistes of Pontus (meaning “The Founder”). The Independent Pontic Kingdom was created by Mithridates I Ctistes (reigned 302-266 BC). His son Ariobarzanes, the second king of Pontus, was succeeded by Mithridates II, who in 220 BC declared war upon the powerful city of Sinope, but was unable to weaken it and the city did not fall into the power of the kings of Pontus until 183 BC when Pharnaces I of Pontus conquered the city and made it the capital of the kingdom.

Mithridates IV Philopator Philadelphus started the policy of friendship of the Kingdom of Pontus with the Roman Republic and her allies which would continue till Mithridates VI Eupator. Mithridates V Euergetes continues his predecessor’s friendly policy towards the Roman Empire and remains in history as a great benefactor to the Hellenic culture. The kingdom reached its greatest height under Mithridates VI Eupator, commonly called the Great, who for many years carried on war with the Romans, himself claimed descent from both the kings of Persia and from Alexander the Great, whom he imitated in his coin portraits and is notable for bringing the Pontic Kingdom to its greatest height. During his long reign (120-63 BC) he extended the kingdom to encompass also the northern coast of the Black Sea.
1.3. Early Life and Reign of Mithridates VI

Mithridates VI, a son of Laodice VI and Mithridates V of Pontus, was born in the Pontic city of Sinope and was raised in the Kingdom of Pontus. The story of Eupator’s birth can be seen as an example of Iranian influence, and probably of Alexander the Great imitation. It is said that the greatness of Mithridates’ reign was foretold by the
heavens: in the year of his birth and of his accession to the throne, a comet appeared filling a quarter of the whole sky and blocking out the sun for seventy days. It symbolized the length of the king’s life, the extent of his conquests and his eclipse of the might of Rome. Another story told is also proving the greatness of the future king: when still a baby, Eupator was struck by lightning, this supposed to provide the explanation for his surname Dionysus, whose mother Semele had been struck by lightning when pregnant with him. As the star and thunderbolt are part of Iranian royal legend, the association of Eupator with lightning recalls the similar experience of Alexander the Great (his mother Olympias had a dream that her womb had been struck by lightning). These stories indicate the importance of the Iranian tradition in the Mithridatid dynasty, and at the same time reflect his belonging to the great predecessor Alexander.4

Almost being poisoned, Mithridates V left the Kingdom to the joint rule of Laodice VI, Mithridates and his younger brother, Mithridates Chrestus. Laodice VI’s regency over Pontus favored Mithridates Chrestus over Mithridates, so he had escaped from the plotting of his mother and had gone into hiding. Mithridates is said to have lived for seven years in the wilderness, here he grew strong and accustomed to hardship, before taking on the throne and initiating his conquest of the Black Sea and Asia. Mithridates’ withdrawal could be a mixture of two further Iranian elements: 1) it is a recognizable feature of Iranian royal legend for the king to spend part of his youth secreted away in the country; 2) the Persians clearly attached great importance to hunting, an exercise which provided an excellent training in riding and shooting (two educational elements listed in Herodotus and the Arabian inscription). These elements once again reflect a comparison of the future king with Alexander the Great.5

Between 116-113 BC Mithridates returned to Pontus and was hailed the King. He showed clemency towards his mother and brother by imprisoning them both and giving them a royal funeral

after death. Mithridates married his first young sister Laodice because of the following reasons: 1) the purity of their blood-line; 2) as a wife to rule with him as a sovereign over Pontus; 3) to be the mother of his legitimate children to ensure their succession and to claim his right as a ruling monarch.

Mithridates entertained ambitions of making his state the dominant power in the Black Sea and Anatolia. After he subjugated Colchis, the king of Pontus clashed for supremacy in the Pontic steppe with the Scythian king Palacus. The most important Crimean centers of Tauric Chersonesus and the Bosporan Kingdom readily surrendered their independence in return for Mithridates’ promises to protect them against the Scythians, their ancient enemies. The young king turned his attention to Anatolia, where Roman power was on the rise. He contrived to partition Paphlagonia and Galatia with King Nicomedes III of Bithynia, but it soon became clear to him that Nicomedes steered his country into an anti-Pontic alliance with the expanding Roman Republic. Mithridates fell out with Nicomedes over control of Cappadocia and defeated him in a series of battles. The Romans twice interfered into the conflict on behalf of Nicomedes (95-92 BC), leaving Mithridates, with little choice other than to engage in a future Roman-Pontic war.6

1.4 Internal and external policy of the Pontic Kingdom and subsequent changes of its borders

1.4.1. Social and economic situation in the Black Sea region

Under Mithridates VI Eupator the Pontic Kingdom managed to expand essentially its territory, having incorporated the Colchis, Cappadocia, Bithynia, the Greek colonies of the Tauric Chersonesus (Bosporan Kingdom) and for a brief time the Roman province of Asia as a result of the Mithridatic wars which took place between 88

and 63 BC, the most prominent and fruitful of which was the First Mithridatic war (Fig. 3).

Figure 3. The Kingdom of Pontus (291-62 BC) at its height: before the reign of Mithridates VI (dark purple), after his early conquests (purple), and his conquests in the first Mithridatic war (pink)


The last quarter of the 2nd century BC the political and socio-economic situation in the Black Sea and Danube region was characterized by the decline of the situation in the Greek poleis. In the second half of the 3rd century BC the Scythian and Sarmatian tribes practically stated supremacy in the steppes of the Northern Black Sea region. Eventually, after numerous battles and peace agreements
Mithridates VI managed to set friendly relations with all the enemies in the mentioned region, who were assisting him in the wars against the Roman Empire. By the end of the 4th century the Black Sea poleis had a tendency for unification in order to create a united inter-pontic market for trade (basically ceramics, jewellery, and wheat). Therefore, the trade circles of the poleis of the region started to consider Sinope and Amasia as two centers for the Black Sea trade – the idea that was supported by the Pontic powers. Due to his three wars on Rome and despite the fact that two of them ended up in defeat of the Pontic Kingdom, Mithridates VI was considered to be the biggest enemy of the Roman Empire.

1.4.2. Policy towards the Roman Empire

The relations with the Roman Empire played an important role in the politics of the kings of Pontus. In respect of Rome, Mithridates VI Eupator at the beginning was using the policy of the Pontic Kingdom as a friend of Roman Empire which helped him strengthen his state by not conducting an aggressive policy towards Rome which was a wise political step.\(^7\) In the second half of the 2nd century BC the Pontic Kingdom with the support of the Roman Empire managed to annex the biggest part of the lost territories of the Otanids. However later the Roman Empire, loyal to its traditional tactics to lessen the power of the empowered by him ally, was trying to restrict the power of the Pontic Kingdom. The acme of the development of these bilateral relations was an unarmed conflict between them which caused enormous influence on the internal politics in Rome as well as on the destiny of the Hellenistic civilization. During these conflicts the Pontic Kingdom managed to reach a short-time peak of its power, but also lived through the period of the total decline.

\(^7\) Saprykin, Понтийское царство, 127.
1.4.3. Policy towards the Northern and Southern Black Sea region area

The characteristic features of the Mithridates VI foreign policy as to the lands of the Black Sea region, according to Saprykin,\(^8\) was the continuation of the policy of philhellenism in the conquered lands which supposed that the Pontic Kingdom was a unifying power for all the Greek lands. By liberation of Greek lands from barbarian tribes (Scythians, Sarmatians, Bastrans), he managed to incorporate the Northern Black Sea Region – Olbia, Chersonesos, Bosporian Kingdom, Colchis and Lesser Armenia into the economic and political structure of the Pontic Kingdom. As for the territories of Thrace and western coast of the Black Sea region, they accepted the protectorate of the Pontic Kingdom but their relationships were based on military support in wars against Rome and didn’t have a direct political or economic dependence upon the Pontic Kingdom.\(^9\)

It is important to underline that except for the goal of expansion of the territories of the Pontic Kingdom and the policy of philhellenism, Mithridates VI viewed the Black Sea region as the military basis for active conquests in the Mediterranean region with strategic centers of Amasia, Colchis and Cappadocia. Mithridates VI at the beginning of his rule concentrated his views on the former capital of the Pontic Kingdom Amasia which guaranteed to him important support. Mithridates Eupator turned Amasia into an important trade and economic center of the Black Sea region. The second point of the King’s policy was the provision to the most important cities of the Pontic Kingdom of the right to produce their own copper coins and the right to produce copper drachmas to Amasia. Later Amasia was the only Pontic city to be allowed to produce its own silver and golden coins for a short time – which was an exceptional case; that was a part of the philhellenic policy of the King as well as a sort of a praise for the merits of the city for Mithridates VI. Another important point was the endeavor of the King to unify the currency of the Kingdom in order to establish strong economic ties within the

8. Ibid., 151-52.
9. Ibid., 130-35.
whole Pontic Kingdom. Mithridates Eupator encouraged the church coin mintage and strengthened the role of the church units. Also, he was providing poleis with limited rights of autonomy which was very important in order to keep the incorporated lands within the borders of the Pontic Kingdom.10

1.5. Land division and administrative organization of the Pontic Kingdom under Mithridates VI

Saprykin11 states that the characteristic feature of the Pontic Kingdom before the rule of Mithridates VI was the mixture of ancient traditions of a village community, tribal relations and poleis land ownership. In the political and administrative respect it supposed the presence of a huge bureaucratic administrative system, which was based on obedience to the King’s power and provided by it rights for autonomy and self-regulation of the Greek poleis.

Jakob Munk Højte12 states that literary sources give very scattered and fragmented information about the administrative organization of the Pontic Kingdom under the dynasty of the Mithridatides and thus the investigation of the administrative structure of the Kingdom of Pontus should be conducted basing on inscriptions, topographical information, numismatic evidence and survey data. Given of the size of the armies of Mithridates VI, we can conclude that the population in the interior Pontos primarily lived in cities. The only city that Mithridates VI founded during his rule was Eupatoria, named so basing on the tradition of the Hellenistic kings who tended to call the new-founded cities in their own or their family names and which was situated south of the confluence of the Rivers Lykos and Iris in a highly strategic point. The evidence does show that kings founded cities in the interior, yet there is no epigraphic or literary evidence which could clarify

10. Ibid., 207.
11. Ibid., 221.
whether the cities were self-governed entities. The only evidence that prove some decree of the cities autonomy are the so-called “municipal” bronze coins in the names of different localities during the reign of Mithridates Eupator. It has previously been thought that the coinage was part of a deliberate policy of hellenization by Mithridates VI which included the attempt to promote Greek polis-like structures in Pontos and permission to allow cities the mintage of their own coins was supposed to foster local pride. But since there was a central authority with an organized political programme behind the coinage as the coin types are the same for all the different mints which means that autonomy wasn’t full. There is an assumption that the issuing place could be a royal administrative center of each unit, while the total of the issuing places in Pontos were ten: Amaseia, Amisos, Chabakta, Gazioura, Kabeira, Komana, Laodikeia, Pharnakeia, Pimolisa, Taulara, Sinope, Amastris, and probably Dia west of Herakleia with the largest output of coins minted in Amisos and Sinope.

Saprykin states that there were two types of cities in the Pontic Kingdom the status of which differed depending on the will of the King: firstly, these were small towns (polihnion) which had no status of a polis, had no agricultural chora and were obeying to the power of the King’s governor (dioikoitis) and secondly, these were Greek poleis (Sinope, Amasia, Amastria, Komana) who received the royal “gift” of restricted autonomy and politeia for its citizens as well as a moderate agrarian territory, divided into small units where agrarians lived. Although, by providing them with restricted autonomy the King circled the land of the poleis by fortifications which limited the freedom of the population. The centers or “capitals” of the administrative units though were frouria while the population lived in katoikiai. Frouria and katoikiai on the royal lands of the Pontus were the main basis of support of the King’s power. Also there were the

14. Saprykin, Понтийское царство, 221.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 234.
horía, which were royal military garrisons and just like katoikiai were subordinated to the frourarhoi, eparhoi and dikoikitoi.

Under Mithridates VI there was the process of gradual change of former fortified settlements into poleis: it included a part of the territory which used to be the King’s land and subordinated to the capitals of the administrative units. The local population either became a part of the whole population, either lived as people who were dependent on the poleis, either could turn into paroikoi, that is citizens with restricted rights who dwelled in the lands that were controlled by the poleis. This as well as the right of copper coin mintage of the cities and fortifications that had no status of polis was a part of the philhellenistic policy of Mithridates.

The most crucial innovation of Mithridates VI was the Eupator’s Law on Inheritance the idea of which was that after the death of the landowner, the land was inherited by his children of male gender and if none – it became the polis’s belonging. The land was controlled by dioikites, representatives of the King and this law answered the interests of small and average landowners. As a consequence, this law strengthened the land ownership of one family and let the landowners to strengthen their positions in the polis. The king of Pontus accepted the right of the citizens to have their own land within the Kingdom, providing them with restricted autonomy – actions that were supposed to soften a serious land crisis in Hellenistic poleis of the Black Sea region of that time. At the same time, the King was fortifying his royal land belongings by building around 75 fortifications in order to keep the poleis under constant control. Pontos had an extensive network of fortresses throughout the country and the key importance of a fortress for the royal administration is proved by the fact that after conquering Lesser Armenia Mithridates ordered the immediate construction of strongholds (phrouriai) which totaled approximately 75, according to Strabon. The phrouriai were alike in construction which constitutes “the core of the administrative system

17. Ibid., 211-36.
of the Pontic Kingdom serving both military and economic functions.”

According to Saprykin, the Temple states in Pontic Cappadocia (Komana, Zela, etc.) consisted of the church, city that situated close to it, and agricultural land that was cultivated by ierodoulous, who paid taxes. From administrative point of view, there are two opinions of researches: either the profit from the church land was transferred to the Kingdom treasury, either to the sacred church treasury. But one thing is for sure: the owner of the land was the King in all the cases. In the church cities mostly lived the church officers (ierodoulloi) and the worshipers (theoforitoi). The main Hierophant in the political hierarchy played the second role after the King. Temple states were allowed to mint their own coins which was supported by Mithridates VI as a part of his philhellenic policy.

2. Cultural record of the Pontic Kingdom under royal influence of Mithridates VI

2.1. The religious propaganda and cults of the Pontic Kingdom

In the religious life of the Kingdom of Pontos, the cults of Hellenic and local deities together with the ideological propaganda closely connected with royal deities, and, on the other hand, the ideological propaganda closely connected with royal dynastic policy, was predominant. The political aspects of the royal propaganda of Mithridates Eupator are usually stressed by scholars, who are connecting it with his anti-Roman activity before and during the Mithridatic Wars.

The political aspects of mithridatic propaganda in the Black Sea territories were deeply connected with the Pontic Kingdom, where the cult of Dionysos was used in the policy of the king. This is reflected on discovered coins and terracottas. In particular, Dionysos and his attributes were stamped on royal and bronze coins: Mithridates Eupator’s royal coins of 96 BC were decorated with an ivy
wreath which asserts the existence of a royal cult of Dionysos and the identification of the king with him in Pontos. In 102/101 BC the cult of Dionysos officially became royal and the king began calling himself Mithridates Eupator Dionysos. The appearance of the god on coins of the Greek cities of Pontos was due to the philhellenic policy of Mithridates. He gave some political and autonomous rights to his Hellenic subjects just after beginning the expansion in Asia Minor and at exactly the same time the terracotta workshop at Amisos began to produce a great number of masks and terracotta figurines of Dionysos, Satyros and Silenos, which were widely spread throughout the whole territory of the Pontic state. This definitely political and ideological propaganda introduced the king as the New Dionysos, eager to free the Greeks from the barbarians and, to a certain extent, from the Romans. Thus, the Pontic royal elite and the followers of the king tried to use religion and cults in order to strengthen the Mithridates Eupator's power.

From early childhood Mithridates appears mostly surrounded by Greeks people. It is remarkable that the title “Second after the king” was given to a Greek man, who was not a member of the royal house. This approach to the Hellenic community by the kings of Pontos is shown also by the support to the cities: the interest of Mithridates to base his reign on an urban structure may have been another aspect in the strengthening of the royal house with Greek support, diminishing the influence of the ancestral nobility. Territorial expansion meant that the royal propaganda mechanism had to portray the king of Pontos as protector and liberator of the Greeks, so that the resident population identified him with the god and worshipped as Savior – Soter. Although this feature was applicable to the cults of numerous gods, popular in the Kingdom of Pontos, Dionysos was the chosen one for official use.

The chief official god was Zeus, who was already a royal deity in the reign of Mithridates III. His image was shown on royal coins as Zeus Etaphore, sitting on a throne and holding a scepter and an eagle as symbols of spiritual and universal power. On the tetradrachms of

Mithridates IV and his wife, standing figures of Zeus and Hera, leaning on scepters can be found. In the same pose with a scepter, a single figure of Hera appears on the coins of Laodike, who after being widowed, for some time ruled alone until Mithridates V came to power. This means that the supreme Olympic gods, Zeus and Hera, were the symbols of power in the Greek world. They were worshipped in the Pontic Kingdom already in the 3rd century BC, and became particularly popular in the 2nd century BC, what proves that the cult of Zeus became official in Pontos under the early Mithridatides and the god was viewed as a protector of the royal family (Fig. 4). On the base of the worshipping of Zeus and Hera, some degree of deification of the rulers was assumed.  

Figure 4. Pontic royal issues with Zeus and Hera


During the reign of Mithridates Eupator, Zeus’ cult continued to be official, what can be seen from numismatics (Fig. 5). The majority of the copper coins from the so-called “quasi-autonomous” mints of Pontic cities bear the image and attributes of Zeus, obviously inspired by the royal propaganda. Some scholars suggest an Iranian origin of Zeus in Pontos, asserting the akin to the Persian royal god Ahura-Mazda, while others suppose the Seleukid influence on the

cult, as the first kings of Pontos had dynastic links with the

Seleukids.23

Figure 5. Coin of Amisos with the type “Zeus/eagle on thunderbolt”
Source: Saprykin, “The Religion and Cults of the Pontic Kingdom.”

In Paphlagonia and Pontos, Zeus was considered to be a protector of regions and cities, as the local villagers, grouped into native or ethnic communities, were the primary form of social organization of peasants in Anatolia. As mostly peasants, villagers and temple-servants were the worshippers of Zeus, one of the chief functions of the god was his role as patron of crops and natural forces.24 In different regions, the cults to Zeus were mostly private, while the official royal cult seems to have been the cult of Zeus Stratios. On the coins of the Imperial period one can see Zeus Nikephoros, Nike and Athena Polias closely linked with Zeus as patron of warriors and armies. These coins were struck in Amasia, where a temple of Zeus Stratios had been erected. The sacrifices to Zeus Stratios were usually offered on hilltops or on the tops of mountains where sanctuaries were constructed. It has long ago been suggested that in the Kingdom of Pontos Zeus Stratios was identified with Ahura-Mazda, a protector of the Achaemenids in ancient Iran. While the Mithridatides regularly tried to imitate with the Persian god, F. Cumont noted that the Greek settlers in Anatolia identified their greatest god Zeus with resident Anatolian deities. This resulted in the syncretistic Greek-Iranian cult of Zeus Stratios with both local Anatolian and Iranian features. The

23. Ibid., 252.
24. Ibid., 253.
Iranian element contained the participation of kings in the sacrificial ritual, as in Persia under the Achaemenids, and the great role of fire during animal sacrifices. Exactly the affinity of rituals in the Persian cult and those belonging to the cult of the Greek Zeus made the two rather alike. Though the rituals on the whole remained Iranian, it is worthy to mention that the kings of Pontos offered sacrifices not to Ahura-Mazda, but to Zeus Stratios in accordance with the Greek tradition. This suggests the Hellenic origin of the cult that became official and royal under the early Mithridatides.

The city coinage under Mithridates Eupator represents Zeus with his attributes (eagle on thunderbolt) as a Hellenic Olympian god (Fig. 5). Zeus was a multi-functional god, who to some extent was associated with Iranian deities like Ahura-Mazda and Mithras, though the Greek and Anatolian population of Paphlagonia and Pontos worshipped him foremost as a Hellenic god, who could be syncretised with Perseus, Men-Pharnakou, and Dionysos. Although practically no traces of the cult of Mithras in Pontos were found, by all means this Iranian god should have been a patron of the Mithridatides judging from their preferred royal name (“given by Mithras”). The cult of Men-Pharnakou continued also in the time of Mithridates VI. The association with Zeus, visible in the use of the thunderbolt, is completed by the depiction of this moon-god as a horse-rider (like Mithras, who was worshipped as a rider in Trapezous) and with a double-axe like Perseus. His link with Zeus and Dionysos is reflected in the use of a bull as his animal attribute, while his closeness to Phrygian Attis – by a pine-cone, a sacred plant of Kybele’s son. The god’s responsibility for fertility and vegetation is evident from the cornucopia, held in the left hand of Men-Pharnakou on the coin of Pharnakes I. As a moon-god Men could defeat darkness and evil. Besides the bull and the horse, a cock was the sacred animal of Men that was also a sacrificial bird in the Persian cults of Mithras and Ahura-Mazda. This profound syncretism of Anatolian, Iranian, and Hellenic cults we can see on Bosporan coins, minted in Pantikapaion (Fig. 6).

25. Ibid., 255-56.
Another deity, who had an official royal cult in Pontos, was Perseus. The cult of this mythical patron achieved its highest popularity in the time of Mithridates Eupator. The royal tetradrachms and bronze city coins reproduce the hero’s portrait and statue, his sacred attributes (Pegasos, winged harpa, aegis with Gorgon) and his female companion Athena. Under Mithridates V when the Kingdom of Pontos attempted to portray the king as protector of Hellenism in northern Anatolia and on the Black Sea, Perseus was associated with Apollon, the most popular Greek god in the Greek poleis of the Black Sea. Pfeiler proved that the portrait wearing a kyrbasia on the anonymous Pontic coins was that of the young king Mithridates Eupator. Contemporary coins of Amisos and Sinope with the head of a young man with a quiver wearing a Persian leather cap most probably also show a portrait of Mithridates Eupator VI (Fig. 7 a-b).²⁶

The introduction of an official cult of Apollon coincided with the proclamation of Sinope as the capital of their kingdom and the change of policy towards philhellenism. The association of Perseus with Apollon and Men-Pharnakou together with Dionysos was due


Figure 6. Mithridates VI Eupator as Men-Pharnakou on coinage from Pantikapaion

*Source:* Saprykin, “The Religion and Cults of the Pontic Kingdom.”
to the syncretism of the popular cult of Zeus with Attis. All of these gods were worshipped by the population of the Pontic state as gods of recovery and revival, conquerors of evil and enemies, what was

Figure 7 a-b. a) Portrait of Mithridates VI Eupator on bronze coinage of Amisos b) Mithridates VI Eupator as Perseus on the civic bronze coinage of Amisos

Source: Saprykin, “The Religion and Cults of the Pontic Kingdom.”

the main point of the official Pontic ideology, which tried to portray the king as the one, called upon to liberate the Greeks and gather neighbouring territories under his rule. This aspect of the political ideology of the kingdom was part of the philhellenic policy of the Mithridatides, which was actively pursued by Mithridates VI, who did not have the option of proclaiming himself a living Zeus, as this god was the highest of all the Olympian gods and goddesses and a creator of life, so such a proclamation might have caused distrust among the population. Nevertheless, to be proclaimed as Mithras or Ahura-Mazda was even more dangerous, as this might have raised the suspicions of the kings’ Hellenic subjects, especially after the kings had started a philhellenic policy. So there was the solution to declare the king a living Dionysos, responsible for victory over evil, darkness and recovery, and easily associated with many Anatolian, Hellenic and even Iranian gods and heroes. This god was equally important to the Anatolian population. The main idea of this political tendency was to deify the ruler to be a god or at the very least simply associated with the god. This religious and ideological point was
substantiated in the royal Mithridatic symbols – the start and crescent, linked with the cults of Men, Mithras, Ahura-Mazda, and which reflected their victory over darkness, evil, what was the main religious aspect of Persian Zoroastrianism. The general tendency of the religious policy of the Pontic kings was to make official those cults of deities, who were connected with military matters together with rebirth and winning over death.

The official cults and propaganda brought to Bosporos from Pontos, Armenia Minor, and Kolchis, influenced the private cults within the whole Kingdom of Pontos including the region around the Black Sea. So we can conclude that there were three levels of Pontic religious ideology and royal propaganda. First the Hellenic, which played the most central role in the deification of the ruler, mostly in the eyes of the Greek subjects, for whom Mithridates Eupator was proclaimed Dionysos and was associated with Ares, Perseus, Apollon, Herakles, and Helios – all sons of Zeus. This was the main cult in Pontos since the early Mithridates. Second, the Phrygian-Anatolian, where Attis and Men seemed to be the chief deities, that even Mithridates Eupator tried to associate himself with him in order to rally the resident population around him. Third was the Iranian: as the kings of Pontos, though being half-Persian by origin, did not declare themselves to be descendants of Mithras and Ahura-Mazda, proclaimed themselves to be equal to the Hellenic and Phrygian gods and heroes, where Perseus was a compromise between Greek beliefs and the Iranian essence of the dynasty.

2.1.1. Temple states in Pontos

Temples to gods of Persian and Anatolian origin in the Pontic Kingdom were distinguished from other temples due to their self-governing powers. They have been called “temple states” and were basically economically independent religious entities. The temple territories probably included: lands, that belonged to the independent native population, territories from villages, unions of villages and

tribes. According to Strabon’s description of Komana Pontike, the priest ruled over the temple and the temple servants, and he had control over the revenues gained from the temple territories. The role of sacred slaves was to work for the temple, providing it with the resources necessary for its development. The vast amounts of capital under divine protection caused the temples to play an important role in the economic life of the area.29

Priests were in charge of the administration of the temples and even came second in rank after the king: the priest of Ma in Komana Pontike wore a diadem during the two annual exoduses of the goddess and came after the king in the hierarchy, while Dorylaos was given the title of high priest by Mithridates Eupator. The priest was responsible for the territory belonging to the temple and its collected revenue. The size and importance of temples were explained in terms of the number of sacred slaves inhabiting the territory, who were subject to the priest, however, the latter one had no right to sell them. Apart from it, according to Strabon, sacred prostitution was also important for the temples. Describing the city of Komana Pontike, that was a large and significant religious centre, located at an important crossroad on a dense trade network, he mentioned a multitude of women, who made gain from their persons. As one of the most important temples of the Kingdom was at Komana and was dedicated to the goddess Ma, it is most probably, that these women were dedicated to this Goddess and gave Komana the reputation of a minor Korinthos. The temple was possibly surrounded by the royal fortresses, and was a town in which the servants of the goddess and the priests lived. Six thousand sacred slaves, dedicated to the service of Ma by taking oaths, were working the fields of the temple’s sacred territory. Festivals dedicated to Ma promoted trade and prosperity.

As for 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 evolved Men Pharnakou in the royal oath, Anaitis was worshipped in Zela and the importance of Zela for the kingdom 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. Thus, it can be suggested that the Pontic Kingdom had a strong Persian influence.  

2.2. The Pontic and Bosporan copper coins of the time of Mithridates VI

Before the end of the second and the first half of the 1st century BC, the only copper alloy used for striking coins was bronze. However, during the reign of Mithridates VI, new alloys had been introduced into coinage in the several mints of Pontus and Paphlagonia, where simultaneous issues of coins Head of Perseus/Pegasus were struck of “pure” copper, and coins Head of Dionysos/cista were struck of brass.

The Pontic and Bosporan copper coins of the time of Mithridates VI from the collection of the State Hermitage in St. Petersburg have been analyzed and during the investigation it was possible to reveal the coins struck of unusual alloys, and also other coins struck of “pure” copper. These were the so called Pontic anonymous obols (Head in leather helmet/Eight-ray star) and Bosporan anonymous obols (Head of Dionysos/Bowcase). The last issues of Bosporan silver coins (Head of Artemis/Stag feeding, Head of Dionysus/Brunch of grapes and Head of Dionysus/Thyrsos) were struck of very poor silver which contained more than 50% of copper and were probably displaced by anonymous obols (Head of Dionysos/Bowcase), struck of “pure” copper.

As the introduction of new copper-base alloys into coinage coincided with the epoch of the Mithridatic wars against Rome, it is apparent that it was dictated by the necessity of searching for additional financial sources needed for preparing wide-scale military operations, and for the organisation of provincial coinage in the expanded Pontic state. Despite the fact that the honour of introducing new alloys into coinage belongs to the Pontic King Mithridates VI and his

30. Ibid., 282-85.
circle, the especially wide use of brass and copper was exploited by Rome after the money reform of Augustus in 23 BC (Fig. 8-12).31

Figure 8. Mithradates VI, 120-63 BC


Figure 9. Mithradates VI, 120-63 BC


31 T. N. Smekalova, “The Earliest Application of Brass and ‘Pure’ Copper in the Hellenistic Coinages of Asia Minor and the Northern Black Sea Coast,” in Mithridates VI and the Pontic Kingdom.
Figure 10. Mithradates VI. AR Tetradrachm


Figure 11. Pontos, King of Mithradates VI

2.3. Mithridates VI of Pontus wrapped in mystery: legends about the king

Throughout the centuries, various legends about the extraordinary intellectual achievements of the last Pontic king have been told. Mithridates supposedly had a prodigious memory. Pliny the Elder and other Roman historians report that he could speak the languages of all the twenty two nations he ruled. Since the 16th century, the documentation and description of the multitude and diversity of languages have been connected with the name “Mithridates.” In 1555, the Swiss scholar Conrad Gesner published a linguistic encyclopedia with the title “Mithridates sive de differentiis linguarum” (about the differentiation of languages). Later on other linguists continued to associate increased knowledge of the languages of the world with the multilingualism of Mithridates.32

Furthermore, Mithridates is said to have lived for seven years in the wilderness as a youth, following the assassination of his father

32. L. Summerer, “The Search for Mithridates. Reception of Mithridates VI between the 15th and the 20th Centuries,” in Mithridates VI and the Pontic Kingdom.
Mithridates V, in 120 BC. Here he grew strong and accustomed to hardship, before taking on the throne and initiating his conquest of the Black Sea and Asia.

Mithridates Eupator VI is most famously said to have sought to harden himself against poison, both by taking increasing sub-lethal doses of the poisons to build tolerance, and by fashioning a “universal antidote” to protect him from all earthly poisons. Obsessed with making himself immune to all poisons, he devised a remarkable project, collecting deadly plant, mineral and animal substances and testing them on condemned criminals, his friends and himself. After hundreds of experiments, Mithridates concocted a daily cocktail of minute doses of poisons mixed with antidotes. Many believed that the mysterious “mithridatium” was the reason for his celebrated vigour and longevity. After his death, versions of Mithradates’ trademarked elixir were eagerly swallowed by Roman emperors, Chinese mandarins and European kings and queens, inspiring a flow of scientific treatises on the Poison King’s long-lost original recipe, said to contain more than fifty ingredients.33

2.4. Monuments, portraits and statues for the king: royal presence in the Late Hellenistic world

A characteristic feature of sanctuaries and political centres in Hellenistic Greece are the numerous monuments erected on different occasions by kings and dynasts or in honour of them. These monuments, as a key strategy of political communication, not only contributed to the appearance of those places, they were the only form of visual royal presence beyond the king’s own realm, thereby influencing the perception of his reign. However, compared to the 3rd and early 2nd century BC, in the Late Hellenistic period a remarkable change can be observed. Considering the quantity and diversity of monuments, only few later monuments, even those connected with an ambitious ruler like Mithridates VI, are mentioned in epigraphical and literary sources or known from the archaeological record.

Already in 116/15 BC Mithridates and his brother were honoured with statues on behalf of the gymnasiarchos Dionysios on Delos, a result of their donations in favour of the gymnasium already mentioned. Also in Delos, in 102/101 BC an architectural monument was dedicated by the priest Helianax, two dedications in honour of Mithridates by the priest Dikaios, again in Delos, and other fragments of inscriptions from Delos naming Mithridates, as well as the dedication of an elaborate bronze vessel by the eupatoristai from the gymnasium. Inscriptions from Chios and Rhodos demonstrate the successful participation of the king at equestrian games there, and another inscription testifies to the honour of an eponymous stephanephoria awarded in Miletos in 86/85 BC. Cicero mentions a statue erected in honour of Mithridates by the Rhodians. It is remarkable, that the Mithridatic monuments on Delos apparently were not erected at the long established places preferred for royal monuments, but the fact that for the first time a Pontic king was markedly present in the context of an international centre reflects the political importance of the king honoured in this way. It is especially the imagery of such monuments that can serve as a prime source for royal ideology.34

The portraiture of Mithridates has to be considered, since at least some of the portraits regarded as portraying Mithridates might have belonged to statues erected in public. Though the identification of Mithridates remains arguable, generally accepted seems the well-known portrait in the Louvre showing the king with a lions’ scalp. But controversy exists over several other portrait-heads often connected with Mithridates. Besides two portrait-heads in Ostia and Athens and three from Delos, portraits in Odessa, from Pantikapaion, and also one in Venice representing him at Helios. The depiction as a beardless young man, the dynamic movement of the head and the hair with emphasized strands and a diadem unites them all; their reference to the portrait of Alexander the Great is evident. But apart from these iconographic elements, the portraits differ considerably from each other and are only loosely related. Some of these heads

34 P. A. Kreuz, “Monuments for the King: Royal Presence in the Late Hellenistic World of Mithridates VI,” in Mithridates VI and The Pontic Kingdom.
are comparatively free versions of Mithridates’ portrait and can refer
to descendents of Mithridates, so resemblance can be expected in
order to emphasize dynastic legitimization.35

There is a well-known group of sculptures from Pergamon with
Mithridates and his residence there from 88-85 BC. The group shows
Herakles with the portrait features and the diadem of a king, about
to rescue Prometheus in presence of the reclining Caucasus. The sub-
ject with its reference to Caucasus could be applied to Mithridates,
and also the dynamic depiction of Herakles could be interpreted in
this way. The sculptural group therefore could be assumed as a
highly political honorary monument, symbolizing the liberation of
the Caucasus-region by Mithridates as Herakles or his liberation of
the Greek world from the Romans. The only monument offering
some clear information on Mithridates kingship is the monument
erected for Mithridates on Delos in 102/101 BC in the sanctuary of
the Samothracian Kabeiroi, though it was not located at or in the vi-
cinity of one of the traditional places preferred for royal monuments.
The Heroon-like construction of the Ionic order opened with a
distyle in antis-façade to the south must have invited the sanctuary’s
visitors to enter the building, appreciating the sculptural decoration
adorning mainly its inner walls (Fig. 13-14).

35. Ibid., 133.
Figure 13. The monument for Mithridates VI on Delos in its reconstructed setting

Source: P. A. Kreuz, “Monuments for the King: Royal Presence in the Late Hellenistic World of Mithridates VI,” in Mithridates VI and the Pontic Kingdom.

Figure 14. The façade of the monument for Mithridates VI

Source: Kreuz, “Monuments for the King.”
It consisted of a display of thirteen portrait-buts inserted in round shields: one of them in the tympanon of the façade, and twelve along the inner walls of the building (Fig. 15).

Figure 15. The portrait-medaillons of the inner walls

Source: Kreuz, “Monuments for the King.”

It is also usually considered as the location of an inscribed statue base mentioning Mithridates that is commonly connected with a fragmentary cuirassed statue found in the sanctuary, showing him as a victorious commander. The monument has usually been interpreted with direct reference to the literary tradition and numismatic evidence. Both emphasize the Greek-Persian character of his kingship as a central aspect of Mithridates’ identity and ideology. Correspondingly the Delos-monument with its portrait gallery is regarded to be of the Greek and Persian background of Mithridatic kingship.36

The tetradrachms of Mithridates VI basically show two different portrait types conveniently called “realistic” and “idealised” (Fig. 16 a-b). The first portrait struck from about 106 BC shows the king in his thirties. Compared to his distinctly Iranian-looking predecessors, the profile of Mithridates is more in accordance with royal Greek iconography of the period. There are no such peculiarities, like en-

36. Ibid., 134-38.
largement 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. The later portrait type shows Mithridates younger. Here the features of the new Alexander, that would liberate the Greeks from their oppressors, are softer and more idealized. As for the coins imitating the tetradrachms of Alexander, they were struck in Mesembria and Odessos under Mithridates and have been suggested to carry his portrait in the guise of Herakles.37

Figure 16 a-b. Tetradrachms of Mithridates VI. a) Early portrait type before 85 BC. b) Later portrait type after 87 BC

Source: J. M. Højte, “Portraits and Statues of Mithridates VI,” in Mithridates VI and the Pontic Kingdom.

Among the sculptured portraits one stands out in particular: the marble portrait with lion exuviae in Paris (Fig. 17 a-b). The only objection one could raise is that it wasn’t for the identification with Mithridates. The most discussed piece of the group of possible portraits of Mithridates is the Herakles from the so-called Prometheus group in the sanctuary of Athena in Pergamon (Fig. 18), which was immediately identified as Mithridates VI when found in 1925.

Figure 17 a-b. Mithridates VI in lion exuviae. Louvre

Source: Højte, “Portraits and Statues of Mithridates VI.”

Figure 18. Herakles with portrait features from the Prometheus group from Pergamon

Figure 19. Portrait from Pantikapaion

Source: Højte, “Portraits and Statues of Mithridates VI.”
Figure 20. Portrait in Odessa Museum
Figure 21. Portrait in the National Museum in Athens

*Source: Højte, “Portraits and Statues of Mithridates VI.”*

Portrait found in Pantikapaion (Fig. 19) definitely shows a royal figure with a sharply turned head. The other portrait in Odessa Museum may have belonged to an acrolithic statue (Fig. 20), as it has the same dramatic turn as the Pantikapaion head and a pronounced Alexander-like treatment of the hair. The same scheme is found in royal portraits found in Athens (Fig. 21) and in Ostia (Fig. 22). All four heads belong from the late 2nd to early 1st century BC and can be said to have a very general resemblance to the coin portraits of Mithridates.38

Figure 22. Portrait from Ostia

Source: Højte, “Portraits and Statues of Mithridates VI.”

To the most probable portrait identifications can now be added a miniature head found in Pantikapaion in 1992 during the excavations of a small temple on the acropolis (Fig. 23).³⁹

Figure 23. Portrait found on the acropolis in Patikapaion, Kerch

Source: Højte, “Portraits and Statues of Mithridates VI.”

³⁹. Ibid., 154.
2.5. Reception of Mithridates VI through centuries

The legendary ruler of Pontus and creator of the Black Sea Empire, Mithridates Eupator VI, was, until recently, one of the most celebrated figures of the Classical world, a hero of opera, drama and poetry. Writers like Dante and Boccaccio transferred ancient history into their own worlds of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, Giovanni Boccaccio wrote the moralistic biographical book *De casibus virorum illustrium* between 1357 and 1363, which tells of the fall of famous men in antiquity, including Mithridates side-by-side with Pompeius Magnus, Caesar, Marcus Antonius, and Cleopatra. The French translation of the book includes four illustrated pages portraying the death of Mithridates (Fig. 24 and 25). Gautier de Costes de La Calprenede was the first French author to write a tragedy about the Pontic king, which appeared under the title *La mort de Mithridate* in 1637. Medieval artists illustrated scenes from his reign, portraying him as a noble “Dark Knight” battling cruel Roman tyrants, Machiavelli called him a valiant hero, while Louis XIV was fascinated by Mithridates’ reign. Immortalised in a tragedy by the great French playwright Racine, Mithridates also inspired the 14-year-old Mozart to write his first opera, “Mitridate, re di Ponto.” Poets celebrated him, from Wordsworth and Emerson to Cavafy and the most famous A. E. Housman.

By the late 20th century, however, Mithridates’ name and deeds began to fade from popular memory. Despite his extraordinary achievements and crucial role in the downfall of the Roman Republic, Mithridates has been inexplicably neglected by English-speaking historians for more than a century. Théodore Reinach’s study, published in 1890, is the great authority on Mithridates. A popular biography in English appeared in 1958 written by the historical novelist Alfred Duggan entitled *He Died Old*. The image of Mithridates as the “Asiatic” enemy of culture and civilization originated in the 1850s with the greatest Roman historian of the 19th century, Theodor Mommsen. As recently as 1975, the German historian Hermann Bengston embraced the stereotype, arguing that the massacre of 88 BC.

Figure 24 a-b. a) “Mithridate VI assiégé et morte de Mithridate VI” by Boccaccio; b) “Mithridate VI assiégé et morte de Mithridate VI” by Boccaccio

Source: L. Summerer, “The Search for Mithridates. Reception of Mithridates VI between the 15th and the 20th Centuries,” in *Mithridates VI and the Pontic Kingdom*. 
This portrayal of Mithridates as ruthless and despotic persists in recent novels and histories about the late Roman Republic: Michael Curtis Ford’s *Last King*, Colleen McCullough’s *The Grass Crown*, and Tom Holland’s *Rubicon*.

Yet there are signs that Mithridates’ star is rising. European scholar, Brian McGing, (*Foreign Policy of Mithridates*, 1986) has examined specific aspects of Mithridates’ reign, while Luis Balles-teros Pastor analysed Rome’s conflicts with an autonomous Hellenistic king in *Mitridates Eupator, rey del Ponto* (1996), and Attilio Mastrocinque with *Studi sulle guerre Mitridatiche* (1998), in his turn, considers how ancient biases influenced modern historians. In 2009, the Danish Centre for Black Sea Studies published a superb collection of scholarly papers edited by Jakob Munk Højte, *Mithridates VI and the Pontic Kingdom*, followed by Philip Matyszak’s popular treatment of the Mithradatic Wars.

Nearly everything we know about Mithridates was written by his enemies. Rome’s fascination with its most dangerous enemies and admiration for Mithridates’ courage and ideals left a wealth of biographical material, scattered throughout many ancient texts. Among the chief sources are: Justin’s summary of a lost history by Pompeius Trogus, Appian’s *Mithradatic Wars*, Dio Cassius’s *History of Rome*, Strabo’s *Geography*, Plutarch’s *Lives of Sulla*, etc.

As the last independent monarch of the Hellenistic era left standing, Mithridates remains an ambiguous figure for many today: hero and model to some, perpetrator of monstrous crimes against humanity according to others.41

*General Conclusion*

The Kingdom of Pontus was founded and ruled by the dynasty of Mithridatides from the 291 BC until its conquest by the Roman Republic in 63 BC and was characterized by vivid ethnic, religious and social features. After the final defeat of the Pontic Kingdom as the result of the 3rd Mithridatic War, part of it was incorporated into the Roman Republic as the province Bithynia et Pontus and the eastern

41. “Mithradates: Scourge of Rome.”
half survived as a client kingdom. The successful strategic geographical position of the Pontic Kingdom as well as its main trading center the city of Sinope helped the economical and financial development of the Kingdom.

The rule of the brilliant legendary Mithridates VI Eupator Dionysus, king of Pontus, who was the dominant figure of the 1st century BC that refused to accept his inclusion in the Roman sphere of control and attempted to assert the political and territorial independence of his lands, is widely known by the clash of the Hellenistic world with the Roman which lead to the acme of the Pontic Kingdom and eventually to its total decline. Compared to other regions in the Black Sea area, Pontos is archaeologically sadly under-explored due to the fact modern Turkish cities are built upon the Pontic ones. Very few excavations have taken place and basic recording of many monuments still lacks.

Mithridates’ policy of philhellenism helped him create a large Hellenistic Empire which left important historical and cultural heritage which is being researched and investigated until the present days. It can be traced in world’s numerous works of art, such as fictional literature, music and applied arts.