



PONTUS

PONTUS, a Greek word meaning “sea,” generally taken in the ancient world to refer to the Black Sea, Pontos Euxeinos, or Axeinos (Strabo 1.2.10 C21). It also came to be applied more specifically to the Hellenistic kingdom of the Mithridatid rulers that emerged in northern Asia Minor at the end of the 4th century BCE. Strabo (12.1.4 C534) says that both Pontus and its neighbor to the south, Cappadocia, developed from the two Cappadocian satrapies of the Persian empire, and that it was the Macedonians—presumably he means the Seleucids—who had named one Pontus and the other Cappadocia. There is, however, no contemporary evidence that the Mithridatids called themselves “kings of Pontus”; and, although they had a notion of their ancestral domains, it was more probably the influence of the Roman province of Pontus, formed in 63 BCE after the death of Mithridates VI Eupator, that led Strabo and subsequent commentators to apply the term retrospectively to the Mithridatid kingdom. This convenient anachronism has survived to the present day.

Geographically, Pontus divided into two distinct parts—a narrow, coastal strip, and a mountainous, inland region interspersed with fertile river valleys and separated from the sea by the Pontic Alps, which run parallel and close to the coast and which limited routes of communications between the two zones. Strabo, a native of the inland town of Amaseia, gives us valuable information about the region. Greek colonies dominated the coast, most importantly Sinope, the best harbor on the south shore of the Black Sea, which planted its own colonies at Cotyora, Cerasus, and Trapezus. Stamped amphora handles demonstrate the extensive trading links of the coastal cities both with other



Black Sea settlements and with the Aegean world. The kingdom was rich in natural resources: a valuable tunny-fishing industry; abundant supplies of wood for shipbuilding; cattle, horses, grains, and fruits in the particularly fertile plain of Themiscyra to the east of Amisus; famous mineral resources in the Paryadres mountains south of Pharnaceia; vines, olives, and other agricultural produce inland at the confluence of the Iris and Lycus rivers in the plain of Phanaroea, the best part of Pontus according to Strabo (12.3.30 C556).

There were three main cultural strands in the population: Greek (mostly on the coast), Persian, and native Anatolian, both associated more with the interior. The most common form of social organization, the villages, can scarcely have had other than age-old Anatolian connotations; they had been there from time immemorial. The best example of their prominence in Pontus is the plain of a thousand villages, Chiliocomum (Strabo 12.3.39 C539). Also representing an enduring symbol of Anatolian continuity was the great temple estate of Ma at Comana, with its six thousand temple servants and extensive sacred territory, all under the authority of the priest, who ranked second in importance after the king (Strabo 12.3.32-36 C557-9). Anatolian too was the temple estate of Men Pharnakou and Selene at Ameria (Strabo 12.3.31 C556), probably founded in the 2nd century BCE by King Pharnakes I (Mithridates VI Eupator (ca. 120-63 BCE), although undoubtedly presenting himself to the Greek world as a civilized philhellene and new Alexander, also paraded his Iranian background: he maintained a harem and eunuchs in true Oriental fashion; he gave all his sons Persian names; he sacrificed spectacularly in the manner of the Persian kings at Pasargadae (Appian, *Mith.* 66, 70); and he appointed “satraps” (a Persian title) as his provincial governors. And although there is only one inscription attesting it, he seems to have adopted the title “king of kings.” The very small number of Hellenistic Greek inscriptions that have been found anywhere in Pontus suggest that Greek culture did not substantially penetrate beyond the coastal cities and the court.

The history of the Mithridatids’ kingdom before the time of Mithridates VI Eupator receives only occasional treatment in the ancient sources. While sometimes having to fight to carve out a niche for itself in Asia Minor, the kingdom also advanced by diplomacy. Marriage alliances with the Seleucids, Greek-style coins, and the sort of benefaction bestowed on Rhodes when it was damaged in an earthquake in 227/6 BCE (Polybius 5.88-90) firmly established the family’s Hellenistic credentials. The aggression of Pharnakes in the first

half of the 2nd century BCE was, apart from his acquisition of Sinope, largely a failure; he was defeated in 179 by a coalition of his neighbors in Asia Minor (Polybius 25.2). However, his policies perhaps pointed the way for his grandson Mithridates Eupator. Having gained control of almost the entire circuit of the Black Sea, Eupator spent the last thirty years of his life engaged in a bitter struggle with Rome. He could never quite match Rome's military power, and with his defeat and death the kingdom of Pontus came to an end as an independent political entity.

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