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## ANCIENT HISTORY

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### PHARNACES I OF PONTUS AND THE EXPANSIONIST POLICY ON THE BLACK SEA: *DYNASTIC AMBITION, MARITIME STRATEGY, AND HELLENISTIC POWER POLITICS IN THE SECOND CENTURY BC*

**Abstract:** This article reassesses the expansionist foreign policy of Pharnaces I of Pontus (ca. 196 – ca. 170 BC), arguing that his reign represents the definitive structural transformation of the Mithridatid state. While Pharnaces I is frequently eclipsed in scholarship by his grandson, Mithridates VI Eupator, this study contends that it was the former who pioneered a grand-scale Euxine strategy predicated upon three interlocking pillars.

First, the capture of Sinope (183 BC) is analyzed not merely as a territorial gain, but as a catalyst that transmuted a minor inland principality into a dominant maritime power with a 400-mile coastline. Second, the study demonstrates that the post-war northern strategy—anchored in the Chersonesus treaty (179 BC) and extended to Odessos and Mesambria—constituted a deliberate geopolitical reorientation that sustained Pontic policy for three generations. Third, the article challenges the traditional paradigm of perennial Pontic-Pergamene enmity, suggesting instead a nuanced diplomatic engagement with Rome from the reign's inception.

By integrating a re-evaluation of the prevailing political conjuncture in Hellenistic Asia Minor, the paper concludes that Pharnaces I successfully exploited the post-Apamea power vacuum. Ultimately, it was his establishment of institutional, territorial, and ideological templates that provided the essential framework for the later Mithridatid challenge to Roman hegemony in the Hellenistic East.

**Keywords:** *Pharnaces I, Kingdom of Pontus, Black Sea, Sinope, Pontic War, Chersonesus, Hellenistic diplomacy, Mithridatid dynasty.*

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#### INTRODUCTION

Pharnaces I, the fifth king of the Mithridatid dynasty of Pontus (reigned ca. 196–ca. 170 BC), occupies a curious position in Hellenistic historiography. Sandwiched between his father Mithridates III, a figure of obscurity, and his grandson Mithridates VI Eupator, the celebrated nemesis of Rome, Pharnaces has frequently been relegated to the status of a minor transitional figure. Pharnaces I was not merely a transitional figure but a strategic innovator who effectively utilized the economic and military potential of the Pontic

region to redefine dynastic mentalities<sup>1</sup>. Standard narratives often treat his reign primarily as a prelude to the dramatic confrontations of the first century BC. Yet, such a perspective fundamentally underestimates his transformative role in the evolution of the Pontic state. Historiographical attention has slowly shifted to correct this imbalance. While early works by Magie (1950) treated Pharnaces as a mere footnote to Roman expansion, later scholarship by Sherwin-White (1984), McGing (1986a-b), and especially Ballesteros-Pastor (2000–2001 and 2025) has begun to rehabilitate him as a significant regional actor. More recent contributions by Højte (2005), Gallo (2012) and Roller (2020) have further clarified the epigraphic and diplomatic dimensions of his rule, revealing a sophisticated statesman rather than a mere barbarian aggressor. Our understanding of Pharnaces is fragmented and heavily mediated by hostile sources. Polybius remains our primary literary authority, yet his account is unmistakably colored by his sympathies for Rome and the Attalid kingdom of Pergamum-Pharnaces' chief rivals. Polybius explicitly characterizes the king as possessing an "arrogant and violent character", a trope that reflects the perspective of his enemies rather than an objective assessment of his statecraft<sup>2</sup>. Livy largely depends on Polybius for his narrative of the period. Strabo offers crucial geographic and antiquarian details but lacks a coherent political narrative. Justin (epitomizing Pompeius Trogus) provides broad strokes often devoid of chronological precision, while Arrian contributes valuable topographic data in his later *Periplus*. This methodological caveat must be applied consistently: where Polybius is used as a source for the events of 183–179 BC throughout this article, the reader should bear in mind that his narrative framework is shaped by Pergamene sympathies, and that independent corroboration -whether epigraphic, numismatic, or from non-Polybian literary traditions- is preferred wherever available. Consequently, the epigraphic record -most notably the treaty with Chersonesus (*IOSPE* I<sup>2</sup>, 402)- serves as a vital corrective, allowing us to reconstruct Pharnaces' diplomatic self-presentation independent of Roman-Attalid propaganda.

This article argues that Pharnaces I was, in fact, the principal architect of Pontic Black Sea hegemony. It was under his rule that the kingdom ceased to be a merely inland Anatolian power and definitively turned its face toward the sea. As recent scholarship by Ballesteros-Pastor<sup>3</sup> and McGing<sup>4</sup> has begun to elucidate, Pharnaces' policy was not a series of disconnected aggressions but a coherent strategy of maritime expansion. Through a close analysis of literary sources and critical epigraphic evidence, we can discern a ruler of fierce ambition and strategic foresight. By capturing Sinope, challenging the Pergamene-Bithynian order, and extending diplomatic protection to the northern shores of the Euxine, Pharnaces I laid the structural foundations for what Roller (2020) has termed the "*Empire of the Black Sea*"—a modern analytical category used here heuristically to

describe Pontic hegemonic ambition, not a term attested in ancient sources—that would later challenge Roman supremacy in the East. The present article advances three specific arguments beyond the existing scholarly consensus. First, it integrates Avram's (2016) redating of the Chersonesus treaty to 179 BC into a comprehensive reassessment of Pharnaces' post-war strategy, demonstrating that the northern pivot was not a consolation prize but a deliberate reorientation already in preparation during the war itself. Second, it develops Ballesteros-Pastor's hypothesis that the Pontic War originated in a failed diplomatic negotiation following the Bithynian-Pergamene war, integrating this into a new reading of the 183 BC embassy to Rome. Third, it offers a critical economic assessment of how Sinope's capture transformed the fiscal basis of the Pontic state, enabling the subsequent naval and diplomatic programme. Before the accession of Pharnaces I, the Kingdom of Pontus was essentially a landlocked power with limited maritime projection. The dynasty itself, claiming descent from one of the seven Persian conspirators against the Magus and later intermarried with Seleucid and Macedonian lines, ruled from the inland stronghold of Amaseia<sup>5</sup>. The Mithridatids were heirs to a complex dual heritage: Persian by blood and tradition yet increasingly Hellenized in their court culture and administrative practices<sup>6</sup>. This duality was physically manifest in their capital, Amaseia, with its royal rock-cut tombs imitating Achaemenid precedents but situated within a Hellenistic political landscape. Despite their illustrious lineage, however, the early kings remained fundamentally terrestrial potentates, their power base located in the fertile river valleys of the Iris and the Lycus rather than on the coast.

## II

At Pharnaces I's accession (*ca.* 196 BC), the Mithridatid kingdom was territorially modest: the city of Amaseia and the Kimiatene region in the interior; Amastris and Amisos on the Euxine coast<sup>7</sup>. The potential locked within this modest inheritance was, however, considerable. The geographic character of the Pontic region was defined by the tension between maritime ambition and inland fragmentation: a continuous chain of coastal mountains -the Paryadres, Skydises, and Moskhika ranges- ran parallel to the shore, creating a narrow but fertile coastal strip separated from the interior by difficult terrain<sup>8</sup>. The interior valleys, watered by the Halys, Iris, Lykos, and Thermodon, were exceptionally productive; the mountains harbored silver, iron, and copper deposits; and the coastal forests of oak, beech, boxwood, and fir provided the raw material for naval construction that would become strategically critical after 183 BC<sup>9</sup>. The region's most important asset, however, was its position

<sup>1</sup> KINACI 2016, 45.

<sup>2</sup> Polyb. XXVII. 17.

<sup>3</sup> BALLESTEROS-PASTOR 2000–2001, 61–66.

<sup>4</sup> MCGING 1986a, 30–35.

<sup>5</sup> Polyb. V. 43. 2; Diod. XIX. 40. 2. See also WALBANK 1957, 573–574; MCGING 1986a, 13; BOSWORTH/WHEATLEY 1998, 155; ARSLAN 2007, 49; BALLESTEROS-PASTOR 2020, 64.

<sup>6</sup> BALLESTEROS-PASTOR 2025, 226.

<sup>7</sup> MAGIE 1950, 190; KINACI 2016, 131–132.

<sup>8</sup> Strab. XII. 3. 1–41.

<sup>9</sup> Strab. XII. 3. 11–13; 32–39; Plin. *nat.* XVI.197. See also KINACI 2015, 191–192.

on the southern shore of the Black Sea a self-contained maritime trading system whose single navigable outlet through the Bosphorus-Dardanelles corridor gave control of the coastlines leverage over the entire commercial network of the sea<sup>10</sup>. Until 183 BC, the harbor of Sinope -the natural commercial hub of this system- was not Mithridatid.

The Mithridatids had governed their small principality for over a century with a combination of Persian genealogical claims -descent from Otanes, one of the seven Achaemenid noble conspirators who placed Darius I on the throne- and progressive adoption of Hellenistic royal culture<sup>11</sup>. The five royal rock-tombs at Amaseia are the most tangible monument of this dynastic tradition; the fifth, evidently prepared for Pharnaces himself, was left permanently unfinished when he transferred the royal capital to Sinope<sup>12</sup>.

The name 'Pharnaces' itself -derived from Old Persian 'Farnaka,' signifying the holder of divine royal glory (*farnah*)- announced the Iranian genealogical claim in the most direct possible way<sup>13</sup>. Yet from the very outset of his reign Pharnaces simultaneously projected a fully Hellenistic identity. His marriage to Nysa, daughter of Antiochus III and queen Laodike, continued the multigenerational pattern of Seleucid-Pontic dynastic alliance<sup>14</sup>.

The dual Iranian-Hellenistic identity of the dynasty was not a cultural contradiction but a strategic resource, simultaneously legitimising rule over the Greek urban populations of the coastal cities and the non-Greek populations of the interior<sup>15</sup>. The management of the Pontic temple-states at Zela and Komana -where Iranian-derived cults (Men at Zela; Ma at Komana) were administered by priests of considerable independent authority- was an essential element of this strategy<sup>16</sup>. Pharnaces I's most original religious innovation was the appropriation of the Men cult, which he designated "*the Men of Pharnaces*" (*Μῆνα Φαρνάκου*), simultaneously subordinating a quasi-autonomous priestly institution to royal authority and reinforcing the Persian legitimating claim through a personal ruler cult in the tradition of Hellenistic "*imitatio Alexandri*". The corresponding reformulation of the royal oath as "*the Fortune of the King and the Men of Pharnaces*" (*Τύχην βασιλέως καὶ Μῆνα Φαρνάκου*) wove together political authority and religious sanction in a formula that would outlast the reign. The practical administrative significance of this

religious appropriation should not be underestimated: by subordinating the high priesthood of Zela to royal appointment, Pharnaces gained indirect control over the temple's extensive agricultural estates and dependent population, thereby integrating a quasi-autonomous economic and territorial unit into the royal fiscal system. The cult simultaneously served as an ideological bridge between the Iranian-derived traditions of the interior and the Hellenistic political culture of the coastal cities, providing a shared religious vocabulary through which diverse subject populations could acknowledge royal authority<sup>17</sup>. The numismatic record of the reign -the highest coin-output die-ratio of any pre-Eupator Pontic ruler- reflects the fiscal expansion that funded these ideological investments as well as the military operations that made them possible<sup>18</sup>.

The political context of Pharnaces I's accession was defined above all by the aftermath of the Battle of Magnesia (190 BC) and the Treaty of Apamea (188 BC). The Apamea settlement had removed the dominant regional power -the Seleucid kingdom- from the western half of the Anatolian chessboard, redistributing vast territories to Pergamon and transforming Eumenes II into the most powerful ruler in Asia Minor<sup>19</sup>. Pontus had conspicuously abstained from the Magnesia campaign, despite Pharnaces I's Seleucid marriage alliance almost certainly a deliberate calculation: the king who would within a few years launch the most aggressive Pontic expansion since the kingdom's foundation had no interest in endorsing a doomed cause<sup>20</sup>. The post-Apamea landscape, with the traditional Seleucid constraints removed and a newly empowered Pergamon as the dominant player, both incentivised and complicated Pontic expansion<sup>21</sup>. Before his main expansionist phase, Pharnaces I appears to have played a role in the war between Prusias I of Bithynia and Eumenes II of Pergamon (ca. 186-184 BC)<sup>22</sup>.

### III

The nature of Pharnaces' role in this conflict —whether he supported Prusias or Eumenes— has been the subject of sustained debate. The traditional reading, based on a passage of Pompeius Trogus (*Prologues* 32), places Pharnaces among the allies of Prusias against Pergamon. Ballesteros-Pastor has challenged this conclusion on the grounds that Bithynia —not Pergamon— was the natural rival of Pontus for control of the southern Black Sea coast and the Bosphorus approaches. If Pharnaces had in fact supported Eumenes in the Bithynian war, his 183 BC embassy to Rome is most naturally read as a bid for the territorial compensation he

<sup>10</sup> Hdt. I. 72; II. 34; Ksen. *Anab.* VI. 1. 15; 4. 4; Diod. XIV. 31. 2; Strab. III. 2. 6; XII. 2. 10; 3. 11–12; XIV. 5. 22; Arr. *Periplus* Ic.; Ath. *Deip.* II. 53b; III. 118c. See also GAJDUKEVIČ 1971, 200–315; KINACI 2014, 210; ROLLER 2020, 55–60.

<sup>11</sup> Polyb. V. 43. 2; Diod. XIX. 40. 2. See also WALBANK 1957, 573–574; MCGING 1986a, 13; 1986b, 248 ff.; BOSWORTH/WHEATLEY 1998, 155; ARSLAN 2007, 49; BALLESTEROS-PASTOR 2020, 64; 2025, 226.

<sup>12</sup> Polyb. XXIII. 9. 2; Liv. XL. 2. 6; Strab. XII. 3. 11; Plut. *Pomp.* XLII. 2–3; App. *Mithr.* 113; Cass. Dio XXXVII. 14. 1–2. See also FLEISCHER 2009, 109–119.

<sup>13</sup> MAGIE 1950, 1088 n.39; KINACI 2016, 122.

<sup>14</sup> ID 1497; OGIS 771; TRACY 1992, 303 ff.; GRAINGER 1997, 52; MAREK 2010, 33; KINACI 2016, 122 ff.

<sup>15</sup> On the hybrid Iranian-Hellenistic ideology of the Mithridatids as a deliberate and sophisticated resource rather than a cultural contradiction, see MAGIE 1950, 207–212; ROLLER 2020, 65–70; BALLESTEROS-PASTOR 2025, 226.

<sup>16</sup> On the Pontic temple-states at Zela and Komana, see Strab. XII. 3. 31–37; MAGIE 1950, 209–212; SÖKMEN 2005, 10; KINACI 2015, 206 ff.

<sup>17</sup> On the Men cult, the reformulation of the royal oath, and its role in appropriating quasi-autonomous temple authority, see MAGIE 1950, 210; Strab. XII. 3. 32–37. See also SÖKMEN 2005, 10; KINACI 2015, 206 ff.; ROLLER 2020, 67–68.

<sup>18</sup> On the Pontic coinage and the die-ratio analysis, see CALLATAÏ 2009, 63–94.

<sup>19</sup> Polyb. XXI. 43; 46; Liv. XXXVIII. 38–39; HANSEN 1971, 87–95; ALLEN 1983, 89–105; KINACI 2014, 203–205.

<sup>20</sup> KINACI 2014, 203.

<sup>21</sup> Polyb. XXI. 45. 8–9; Liv. XXXVIII. 39; XXXII. 56. 4–5. Also see MAGIE 1950, 180–196.

<sup>22</sup> Iust. XXXII. 4. 7; Trog. *Prol.* 32. See also WALBANK 1957, 300; MALAY 1992, 64; HABICHT 2006, 325; ARSLAN 2007, 63.



had been promised —a demand whose refusal by Eumenes would then provide the proximate diplomatic trigger for the Pontic War. On this reconstruction, the conflict of 183–179 BC was not a product of simple territorial aggression but the consequence of a failed post-war negotiation, a dynamic familiar from other Hellenistic inter-state conflicts in which uncompensated alliance service bred dangerous grievance. The evidence does not permit certainty, but the revisionist reading is consistent with all surviving material and substantially enriches our understanding of the diplomatic context from which the war emerged.

#### IV

The capture of Sinope in 183 BC was the pivotal act of the reign, transforming the nature and trajectory of the Pontic kingdom at a stroke. Sinope occupied a narrow promontory with twin natural harbors, rocky shores on three sides, and strong landward fortifications; its commercial significance —as the nodal point of Black Sea trade routes, the principal market for Pontic exports (fish, timber), and the dominant entrepot of the southern Euxine— made it both exceptionally valuable and exceptionally difficult to take<sup>23</sup>. The logistics of the siege required a combined land-sea operation: the city's peninsular position, which made a purely terrestrial assault insufficient, presupposed Pontic command of at least local naval superiority —a conclusion that follows not from speculation but from topographic necessity, since Sinope's peninsular defences rendered a purely landward assault impracticable without simultaneous naval blockade. The harbours of Amastris and Amisos, already under Mithridatid control, provided the most plausible staging bases for such an operation. This implies more substantial naval preparation in the years before 183 than the sources explicitly record<sup>24</sup>. The conquest provoked immediate protests to Rome from Rhodes and Eumenes II, testimony to the city's regional importance and the alarm its capture generated across the Hellenistic world<sup>25</sup>.

The results of the conquest were immediate and transformative. The seizure of Sinope and her colonial foundations —Kotyora, Kerasus, and the subsequent refoundation of Kerasus as Pharnakeia— brought the entire Euxine littoral from Amastris to the promontory of Zephyrium, a distance of some 400 miles, under Pontic control<sup>26</sup>. Sinope's harbor provided the operational base for a Pontic navy that had not previously existed<sup>27</sup>. The transfer of the royal capital from Amaseia to Sinope —physically manifested by the abandonment of the unfinished fifth royal tomb at Amaseia— declared the kingdom's reorientation from land power to maritime power in unmistakable terms<sup>28</sup>. To the

east, the foundation of Pharnakeia (through the compulsory transfer of Kotyora's population to the refounded Kerasus) secured Pontic control of the iron mines of the southern mountains while also providing a forward operating base for engagement with the Colchian hinterland and access to the timber and linen trade that would later underpin the Mithridatid naval program. The economic transformation effected by these coastal acquisitions was substantial. Sinope's harbour dues, levied on the transit trade between the grain-producing northern shores and Mediterranean markets, now accrued directly to the Pontic treasury. The iron mines of the Paryadres range, accessed through Pharnakeia, provided both a military resource and an export commodity. The fisheries of the southern Euxine —Sinope's salted fish and garum were renowned throughout the Mediterranean— constituted a further significant revenue stream. Against these gains must be set the crushing burden of the 179 BC indemnity: the combined 1,200 talents owed to Ariarathes, Morzios, and Eumenes represented a sum that, as Magie observed, Pharnaces could not discharge even after twenty years. The tension between expanding coastal revenues and crippling war debt defined the fiscal reality of the post-war reign and conditioned the scale of the northern strategy that followed<sup>29</sup>.

From the coastal acquisitions, Pharnaces moved into the Anatolian interior. The Paphlagonians, whose fragmented political organisation had resisted external domination, were overrun: Pharnaces devastated the country and seized the treasure that Morzios, and enslaved a portion of the population<sup>30</sup>. The Galatian confederacies of central Anatolia were simultaneously encouraged, through promises of pay and the cultivation of specific chieftains, to raid Pergamene territory a proxy strategy that extended Pontic pressure without direct confrontation<sup>31</sup>. The invasion of Cappadocia escalated the conflict with Pontus, forcing Pergamon and Cappadocia to form a broader coalition<sup>32</sup>. The capture of Tiejum on the Euxine coast —where Pharnaces' general Leocritus, in a significant breach of military honour, slaughtered the mercenaries defending the city after pledging their safety— was the act that finally drew Prusias II of Bithynia into the war<sup>33</sup>.

The war that followed (*ca.* 183–179 BC) was fought on multiple fronts against the combined forces of Eumenes II, Prusias II, and Ariarathes IV, with Morzios of Paphlagonia also in the coalition<sup>34</sup>. Three successive Roman investigative commissions were dispatched to Asia Minor during the conflict, demonstrating the thoroughness with which Roman informal hegemony pervaded the post-Apamea

<sup>23</sup> Hdt. I. 72; II. 34; Ksen. *Anab.* VI. 4. 4; Strab. III. 2. 6; XII. 2. 10; XIV. 5. 22; Ath. *Deip.* II. 53b; III. 118c.

<sup>24</sup> Polyb. XXIII. 9. 1–3; XXIV. 1. 1–3; Liv XL. 2. 6; Strab. XII. 3. 11. See also KINACI 2016, 164 ff.

<sup>25</sup> Polyb. XXIII. 9. 2; Liv XL. 2.

<sup>26</sup> Ksen. *Anab.* V. 3. 2; 5. 3; 10; Diod. XIV. 30. 5; 31. 1; Arr. *Periplus* XVI. 3–4; Ps.-Scymnus 911. Also see OLSHAUSEN 1974, 154.

<sup>27</sup> MAGIE 1950, 191–192, on Sinope's transformation into the Pontic capital. See also KINACI 2016, 162 ff.

<sup>28</sup> Plut. *Pomp.* XLII. 2–3; App. *Mithr.* 113; Cass. Dio XXXVII. 14. 1–2. For the

location of the capital, see Cic. *Leg. Man.* VIII. 21; Diod. XIV. 31. 2; Memnon XXXVI. 3. Also see FLEISCHER 2009, 109–119.

<sup>29</sup> Arr. *Periplus* XXVII. 3–4; Strab. XII. 3. 17. Also see MAGIE 1950, 193; BALLESTEROS-PASTOR 2000–2001, 63. On the Colchian timber trade, see Strab. XI. 2. 17–18; XII. 3. 12. Also see LORDKIPANIDZE 1983, 131; 141; 2003, 9; TODUA 1990, 45 ff.

<sup>30</sup> Polyb. XXV. 2. 1–9; Diod. XXIX. 23. Also see KINACI 2014, 211.

<sup>31</sup> Polyb. XXIV. 14. 6–7; Also see GRIFFITH 1935, 184; WALBANK 1979, 227; STROBEL 1996, 220–235.

<sup>32</sup> Polyb. XXIV. 14. 10.

<sup>33</sup> Polyb. XXV. 2. 9; Also see MAGIE 1950, 192; NIESE 1963, 75.

<sup>34</sup> Polyb. XXIV.5.1–8; Diod. XXIX.22. See also KINACI 2014, 211 ff.



order even without direct military intervention<sup>35</sup>. The Senate declined to intervene militarily, being apparently unwilling to become involved in a war which lay outside the sphere of Roman influence and concerned only the Asianic allies and its commissioners condemned Pontic conduct while doing nothing to enforce the condemnation<sup>36</sup>. Rome's calculation was, as has been suggested, more complex than neutrality: by allowing the coalition to exhaust Pharnaces while maintaining senatorial oversight, the Senate preserved its role as arbiter without committing forces to a peripheral conflict<sup>37</sup>.

The peace of 179 BC was costly in both treasure and territory. Pharnaces was required to withdraw from Paphlagonia and Galatia, restore royal territory to Ariarathes IV, pay a combined indemnity of 900 talents to Ariarathes and Morzios and a further 300 talents to Eumenes, return the city of Tios, and provide hostages. The states included as *adscripti* in the settlement -Artaxias of Armenia, the Sarmatian dynast Gatalos "from Europe," the Herakleians, Mesambrians, Chersonesians, and Cyzicenes- span the entire Black Sea littoral, testament to the geographic reach of the conflict Pharnaces had set in motion.<sup>38</sup> The financial consequences were severe and long-lasting<sup>39</sup>. Nevertheless, the peace's most important feature was what it did *not* require: Pharnaces retained Sinope, Pharnakeia, Kerasus, and Amisos. The maritime foundations of his strategy survived intact<sup>40</sup>.

The assessment just offered requires qualification. It would be possible to read the same evidence less favourably: the four-kingdom coalition inflicted a decisive military defeat; the 1,200-talent indemnity left Pharnaces unable to meet his financial obligations even twenty years later; the treacherous massacre at Tieium by his general Leocritus damaged Pontic diplomatic credibility; and the complete failure of the Anatolian expansion suggests overreach rather than strategic calculation. These considerations cannot be dismissed. The argument advanced here is not that Pharnaces I was uniformly successful, but that his failures in the Anatolian interior did not negate the structural transformation he had already achieved on the coast —and that the northern pivot, whatever its immediate motivation, proved to be the more consequential strategic decision. The distinction between "strategic vision" and "opportunistic adaptation to defeat" may, in the end, be less significant than the outcome: a kingdom whose maritime infrastructure and diplomatic network would define Pontic policy for the next three generations.

<sup>35</sup> For the first embassy, see Polyb. XXIII. 9. 3; Liv. XL. 2; for the second, see Polyb. XXIV. 1. 3–4. For the third, see Polyb. XXIV. 5. 1–8; Diod. XXIX. 22; see also WALBANK 1979, 267; HABICHT 2006, 177 n. 10.

<sup>36</sup> SHERWIN-WHITE 1984, 19–22; MAGIE 1950, 191–193.

<sup>37</sup> BALLESTEROS-PASTOR 2000–2001, 64, argues that Rome's apparent indifference reflected a calculated strategy: by allowing the coalition to weaken Pharnaces, the Senate preserved its role as arbiter.

<sup>38</sup> Polyb. XXV. 2. 3–12. The *adscripti*: Artaxias of Armenia, Akousilochos, the Sarmatian dynast Gatalos, the Herakleians, Mesambrians, Chersonesians, and Cyzicenes. Analysis: KINACI 2014, 214–216; AVRAM 2016, 228–230.

<sup>39</sup> On the pre-war financial commitment to Athens, see MAGIE 1950, 192–193. The connection with *I. Delos* 1497 *bis* is discussed by AVRAM 2016, 219–221.

<sup>40</sup> Polyb. XXV.2.1–15. See also KINACI 2014, 216–217.

The management of Rome during and after the war is among the most instructive dimensions of Pharnaces I's statecraft. His insertion into the Chersonesus treaty of a clause requiring both parties to maintain friendship with Rome and to take no action against Roman interests was a voluntary act of deference, not a Roman-imposed condition<sup>41</sup>. This proactive Roman *philia* strategy -which his successor Mithridates IV would formalise with the Capitoline dedication- reflects a sophisticated appreciation of Roman diplomatic power and a determination to manage it rather than defy it<sup>42</sup>. It was, among other things, a calculated response to Eumenes II's more intimate Roman connections, which had given Pergamon a consistent diplomatic advantage throughout the war<sup>43</sup>.

## V

The period following the peace of 179 BC is, strategically, the most important of the reign, and the one most consistently misread. A methodological note is necessary at the outset: the literary sources for the post-war period are dramatically thinner than for the war itself. Polybius' narrative, which provides detailed coverage of the conflict of 183–179 BC, effectively ceases to track Pontic affairs after the peace settlement; Livy's dependence on Polybius means that he too falls silent. The analysis of the post-179 period must therefore rely more heavily on epigraphic evidence (above all *IOSPE* I402<sup>2</sup> and the Odessos inscription), numismatic data (Callatay's die-ratio analysis), and the retrospective notices of Strabo and Justin. This shift in the evidentiary basis necessarily affects the character of the argument: where the war narrative can be reconstructed in considerable detail, the post-war strategy must be inferred from a smaller but, in some respects, more reliable body of evidence. Deprived by the allied kings of his prospect of expansion in the Anatolian interior, Pharnaces turned his attention to the Black Sea itself, "conceiv[ing] the plan of extending his influence across the sea and creating an empire on its northern coast"<sup>44</sup>. This reorientation requires careful assessment. The question of whether Pharnaces' northern pivot was a premeditated strategy or an opportunistic response to defeat cannot be resolved with certainty from the surviving evidence. Three considerations, however, favour the deliberate interpretation. First, the Chersonesus treaty was concluded in the same diplomatic settlement as the peace of 179 BC, suggesting that northern engagement was already in preparation during the war itself, not improvised after its conclusion. Second, the infrastructure required for trans-Euxine naval operations —the harbor arsenal at Sinope, the shipbuilding capacity implied by the coastal timber resources— presupposes years of preparation that predate the peace. Third, the inclusion of the Roman *philia* clause in the Chersonesus treaty reflects a level of

<sup>41</sup> On the strategic logic of the Roman *philia* clause, see AVRAM 2016, 227–230. The voluntary character of the insertion is stressed by BALLESTEROS-PASTOR 2000–2001, 64.

<sup>42</sup> On the Mithridates IV Capitoline dedication, see MELLOR 1978, 319–330; MAGIE 1950, 193–194; AVRAM 2016, 220–223.

<sup>43</sup> ALLEN 1983, 89–105; SHERWIN-WHITE 1984, 19–22.

<sup>44</sup> MAGIE 1950, 192–193; KINACI 2016, 189–193.

diplomatic sophistication inconsistent with mere reactive improvisation. The northern strategy was grounded in a lucid appreciation of the economic and strategic logic of Black Sea geography. The northern Black Sea had long been the economic complement of the southern shore: the grain of the Crimean and Ukrainian steppes moved southward through the Bosporean ports; the fish, amber, and furs of the northern coastlands flowed to Mediterranean markets through Sinope and Amisos.<sup>45</sup> A power controlling both shores would control the entire economic system of the sea, and the prospect of that control – what a subsequent scholar has described as ‘an actual annexation of the Cimmerian Bosporus’ in terms of the legitimating precedent it created – would prove even more consequential than the territorial reality of 179 BC.<sup>46</sup>

The instrument of this northern strategy was the treaty with Chersonesus Taurica (modern Sevastopol), recorded in the inscription *IOSPE* I<sup>2</sup> 402. The text preserves the oath Pharnaces swore to the Chersonesian ambassadors Matris and Herakleides: perpetual friendship, military assistance against ‘neighboring barbarians’ (the Scythians, whose pressure on the city’s agricultural hinterland was intensifying through the second century), and the preservation of Chersonesian democracy. The philological structure of the inscription merits closer attention than it has generally received. The dating formula —“*the 157th year, as king Pharnaces counts*”— is the crux of the chronological debate. The unusual qualifying phrase “as king Pharnaces counts” signals that the era employed was not self-evident to the Chersonesian recipients, implying a recently adopted calendrical convention rather than a long-established dynastic era. This observation, combined with the Sinopean amphora stamp evidence analysed by Avram, points to a Sinopean civic era (beginning autumn 336 BC) adopted by Pharnaces after making Sinope his capital, yielding a date of May 179 BC —precisely the moment of the peace settlement. The oath formula itself mirrors the royal cult formula discussed above, confirming that the religious-political synthesis was embedded in Pontic diplomatic practice, not merely in domestic administration. Crucially, the Rome clause —requiring both parties to maintain friendship with Rome and take no action contrary to Roman interests— appears as an integral element of the oath rather than a later interpolation, confirming its voluntary and proactive character. The “neighboring barbarians” are the Scythians, not the Sarmatians: the Sarmatian dynast Gatalos appears as an *adscriptus* on Pharnaces’ side in the peace of 179 BC, a detail that illuminates the complex and shifting alignments of Pontic steppe diplomacy<sup>47</sup>. The inclusion in both parties’ oaths of a clause requiring maintenance of friendship with Rome – a clause Pharnaces himself inserted – reflects his proactive Rome-management strategy and his

understanding that the protection of Chersonesus had to be framed within terms the Senate could accept.

The Chersonesus treaty was one element of a broader northern strategy. An inscription from Odessos (modern Varna) on the western Black Sea coast records a similar request for Pontic military assistance, placing Odessos within the same network of Pontic client relationships<sup>48</sup>. Mesambria’s inclusion among the *adscripti* of the 179 BC peace treaty reflects prior western Black Sea diplomatic engagement. The naval capacity required to sustain protection commitments across the full circumference of the Black Sea was substantial, presupposing a fleet capable of trans-Euxine military operations a capability that Sinope’s harbor arsenal had made possible and that the post-war years were devoted to developing<sup>49</sup>. The Chersonesus and Odessos protection arrangements were instruments of commercial and strategic control, not acts of disinterested philhellenism, and must be read within this framework of maritime hegemony<sup>50</sup>.

## VI

The ideological dimensions of the reign are inseparable from its strategic logic. The hybrid iconography of Pontic coinage – the diademed royal portrait and Greek legends of Hellenistic monarchy combined with the star-and-crescent emblem connecting Iranian astral religion to the dynasty’s Achaemenid ancestry – mirrors in material form the dual legitimating strategy that Pharnaces I maintained throughout his reign<sup>51</sup>. The die-ratio analysis confirms that this ideological program was sustained by expanding fiscal resources: the coin output of Pharnaces I exceeds that of every previous Pontic ruler, directly reflecting the revenues of the captured coastal cities<sup>52</sup>. The coinage spoke simultaneously to Greek urban subjects (in the language of Hellenistic kingship), Iranian aristocratic clients (through the astral symbolism of Achaemenid tradition), and the wider Hellenistic world (through the diademed portrait and the Greek legends that inscribed the king within the community of recognized monarchies)<sup>53</sup>.

The administration of conquered territories followed the same dual pattern. The Greek coastal cities – Sinope, Amisos, Pharnakeia – retained recognizably Greek civic institutions while acknowledging royal sovereignty. The rural hinterland of the Anatolian interior was administered through Persian-derived systems rooted in the kingdom’s ancestral practices<sup>54</sup>. The compulsory population transfer that created Pharnakeia from the combined populations of Kotyora and Kerasus was the application of standard Hellenistic

<sup>45</sup> On the economic complementarity of the northern and southern Black Sea, see GAJDUKEVIČ 1971, 200–315; SAPRYKIN 2014, 354 ff.; ROLLER 2020, 55–60.

<sup>46</sup> BALLESTEROS-PASTOR 2000–2001, 64. Also see KINACI 2016, 189–193.

<sup>47</sup> *IOSPE* I<sup>2</sup> 402; BURSTEIN 1980, 5–7; MCGING 1986a, 31; LESCHHORN 1993, 78; HØJTE 2006, 137 ff.; KINACI 2014, 214–216; AVRAM 2016, 231–232; GALLO 2020, 64–66.

<sup>48</sup> *IGBulg* I 40; ROSTOVITZ 1941, 1482 dn. 75a; HODDINOTT 1975, 49–56.

<sup>49</sup> MAGIE 1950, 192–193; KINACI 2016, 189–193.

<sup>50</sup> GAJDUKEVIČ 1971, 300–315; TSETSKHLADZE 2000–2001, 13–15; KINACI 2016, 189–193; ROLLER 2020, 61–72.

<sup>51</sup> CALLATAÿ 2009, 74–78; 89–94.

<sup>52</sup> CALLATAÿ 2009, 89–94.

<sup>53</sup> On the star-and-crescent on Pontic coins, see MAGIE 1950, 207–212; ROLLER 2020, 65–70.

<sup>54</sup> MAGIE 1950, 207–215; ROLLER 2020, 65–75; BALLESTEROS-PASTOR 2020, 64; 2025, 226.

*synoikismos* to the specific challenge of consolidating control over a newly acquired territory with a dispersed indigenous population<sup>55</sup>. Throughout, the administration served the strategic objective: the creation of a commercially productive coastal zone capable of sustaining the naval program and the wider ambitions of the Black Sea strategy.

The significance of the reign can be measured most precisely by what it bequeathed. Mithridates IV Philopator Philadelphos immediately formalised the Rome-management framework Pharnaces had established, concluding a formal treaty of *amicitia* with the Senate and making a ceremonial offering at Rome – the Capitoline dedication – that converted Pontic-Roman relations from the informal *philia* of the Chersonesus clause into a recognised international status<sup>56</sup>. The dating of this dedication to shortly after 167 BC confirms a chronology of the Pontic king-list consistent with Pharnaces I's death ca. 170 BC and the 179 BC date of the Chersonesus treaty<sup>57</sup>. Mithridates V Euergetes pursued the Galatian and Cappadocian ambitions of his predecessor through diplomacy rather than war; Mithridates VI Eupator explicitly “revived the plan of Pharnaces for the conquest of Paphlagonia” an institutional continuity confirmed by Justin's statement that Mithridates VI was the direct genealogical heir of Pharnaces I<sup>58</sup>.

The most consequential element of the legacy was conceptual. In the years following 179 BC, Pharnaces I appears to have been the first Pontic ruler to treat the Black Sea as a unified political space susceptible to hegemonic governance – a concept that finds partial parallels in the Ptolemaic thalassocracy of the eastern Mediterranean and in the Rhodian claim to police the Aegean against piracy, but that was distinctive in its application to a semi-enclosed sea whose single navigable outlet through the Bosphorus-Dardanelles corridor created uniquely favourable conditions for hegemonic control – a concept grounded simultaneously in commercial logic (a self-contained maritime system with a single navigable outlet), strategic logic (a sea that was simultaneously highway and defensive moat), and ideological logic (the Achaemenid ancestral claims to the Pontic coastlands that the dynastic genealogy legitimated)<sup>59</sup>. Subsequent attempts to realise this vision- by Mithridates VI, who came closer than any ancient ruler to enclosing the entire Black Sea circumference within a single political authority. The economic substructure that made Mithridatid Black Sea hegemony viable -the harbor network, the commercial route system, the client relationships with northern polities- had been built over generations, and it is to the reign of Pharnaces I that its origins must be traced<sup>60</sup>.

The reign of Pharnaces I of Pontus (ca. 196-ca. 170 BC) thus represents one of the transformative episodes in the political history of the ancient Black Sea world, and one of the most consequential sequences of strategic decision-making

in the Hellenistic east. From the modest inheritance of two coastal cities and an inland capital, Pharnaces I constructed, in the course of roughly three decades, the first Pontic maritime state: a kingdom controlling 400 miles of Euxine coastline, anchored by a naval arsenal at Sinope, possessing protection relationships with the principal Greek cities of the northern shore, and animated by a strategic ideology that defined the Black Sea as a coherent political domain amenable to Pontic hegemony. When the available evidence is assessed in its totality – the literary record of Polybius, Strabo, Livy, Appian, and Justin; the epigraphic materials of *IOSPE* I<sup>2</sup> 402 and *I. Delos* 1497 bis; the numismatic analysis of Callataÿ; the archaeological evidence of the Amaseia tomb sequence -what emerges is not the portrait of a reckless overreacher whose ambitions were deservedly checked, but the more complex and more nuanced figure of a king of “*great ability and boundless ambition*” who grasped the strategic possibilities of his moment, built upon them with sophisticated diplomacy and consistent purpose, and established the institutional and territorial conditions that his successors would inherit and, in the case of Mithridates VI Eupator, exploit to mount the most sustained challenge to Roman power in the Hellenistic east. Whether Pharnaces himself envisioned the scale of that later confrontation is beyond the evidence; what can be demonstrated is that the structural foundations were his achievement<sup>61</sup>.

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<sup>55</sup> Strab. XII. 3. 17; Arr. *Periplus* XVI. 3–4; Also see KINACI 2014, 209–210.

<sup>56</sup> MAGIE 1950, 193–194.

<sup>57</sup> On the Capitoline dedication, see MELLOR 1978, 319–330; AVRAM 2016, 220–223. MAGIE 1950, 1088 n.39, had placed it earlier.

<sup>58</sup> Iust. XXXVIII. 6. 2. See also ARSLAN 2007, 40–55; KINACI 2016, 202.

<sup>59</sup> BALLESTEROS-PASTOR 2000–2001, 64–65; KINACI 2016, 199–202.

<sup>60</sup> KINACI 2016, 199–202. Also see ROLLER 2020, 120–150.

<sup>61</sup> MAGIE 1950, 190; MCGING 1986b, 255–259; KINACI 2016, 122 ff.



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