PHARNACES II AND HIS TITLE 'KING OF KINGS'*

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Abstract

This short paper examines the titulature of Pharnaces II of Bosporus and his assumption and use of the titles 'Great King' and 'Great King of Kings' with particular regard to his ambitions and external policies.

Pharnaces II of Bosporus, the son of Mithridates Eupator, bore the titles 'Great King' and 'Great King of Kings'. These appellations appear on inscriptions as well as on the royal coins issued between 55/54 and 51/50 BC.¹ In this paper we will propose some reasons to explain Pharnaces' assumption of these titles. As we will see, they reflected the king's ambitions and his policy, not only in regard with Rome but also in relation with different areas of the Black Sea.

To begin with, this trend in Pharnaces' royal titulature represents an aim to highlight the Achaemenid roots of his dynasty, which had been claimed by his predecessors as well.² Actually, Mithridates Eupator had appeared as 'King of Kings' in an inscription from Nymphaeum and was depicted as an Oriental emperor by Posidonius.³ In particular, the

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¹ On Pharnaces as Great King, see *CIRB* 31, 979; and possibly Arseneva, Böttger and Vinogradov 1995, 217–19 (*SEG* 45, no. 1020; *L'Année Épigraphique* 2009, no. 1225). On his title 'Great King of Kings', see *CIRB* 28, and the lead plaque studied by Yailenko 1986, 619–27: ἐπὶ Κλιτομά(χ)ου, | Θευδαισίου: | ἄε φίλων <μ> | μεγάλου βασιλ- | έως βασιλέων | Φαρνάχου ὅτ(ο)υ | μάχρεος. This title has also been reconstructed in *CIRB* 29: [Φαρνάχης(?) μέγας βασιλε]ὑς βασιλέων | [ὑποτάξας βαρβάρους τοὺς κα]τὰ τὴν Εὐρώπην | [καὶ τὴν Ἀσίαν? ἀνέθηκε] Διλ Γενάρχηι (*SEG* 40, no. 627 (1); Y.G. Vinogradov, *Bulletin Épigraphique* 1990, no. 580). Yailenko (2010, 205–07) proposed to relate this last inscription to Mithridates Eupator, and defended the authenticity of the plaque (Yailenko 2010, 210–11; *L'Année Épigraphique* 2010, no. 1444), considered false by Vinogradov (*Bulletin Épigraphique* 1990, no. 514). On coins bearing this same title, see Gaidukevich 1971, 322–23; Golenko and Karyszkowski 1972.

² Hoben 1969, 15. On the Persian lineage of the Pontic dynasty, see Panitschek 1987–88; Ballesteros Pastor 2012. On the Iranian tradition in Pontus, see further McGing 2014. About the title 'King of Kings', see, in general, Griffiths 1956; Wiesehöfer 1996b; Muccioli 2013, 406–12; Engels 2014; Strootman 2014.

³ Posidonius FGH 87, F36; Ballesteros Pastor 1995; Muccioli 2013, 410–11 (with further bibliography). Yailenko's edition of this inscription (1985, 618; SEG 37, no. 668) also suggests the title Basileus Basileon Megas; cf. contra Y.G. Vinogradov, Bulletin Épigraphique 1990, no. 589. Mithridates also appears as King of Kings on an inscription of his granddaughter, queen Dynamis of Bosporus (CIRB 979). This title of Eupator has been restored in several Bosporan inscriptions: Arseneva, Böttger and Vinogradov 1995, 205–07; Ivantchik and Tokhtasev 2011 (L'Année Épigraphique 2009, appellation as 'Great King of Kings' seems to have a clear connection with Persian royalty: on the one hand, it joins two of the titles attributed to Darius I and his successors, on the other, this denomination appears in the monument of Nemrut-Dagi built by Antiochus I of Commagene when referring to the Achaemenid kings.⁴ This last evidence reveals how the denomination *Basileus Basileon Megas* could be regarded as the Greek expression chosen to define the Persian royalty in the late Hellenistic period.⁵

Mithridates Eupator allegedly descended from the Achaemenids, and thus Pharnaces aspired to the same treatment given to his ancestors. In this sense, it is worth noting that Pharnaces' sons were called Darius and Arsaces.⁶ This claim of the Achaemenid lineage by members of the old dynasty of Pontus continued at least until the time of Mithridates VIII of Bosporus, Pharnaces' great-grandson, who solemnly proclaimed to descend from Achaemenes (Tacitus *Annals* 12. 18. 2).

The inscription *CIRB* 29, which presumably records Pharnaces' title 'Great King of Kings', may be related with the ruler's military achievements in both Asia and Europe, and this is another proper feature of a Persian King of Kings since the time of Darius the Great.⁷ Such conquests were relatively easy for Pharnaces, whose dominions laid in the Cimmerian Bosporus, placed in the very limit of both continents. Although we cannot discard the possibility that this inscription alludes to the cities located on both sides of the Bosporus,⁸ the mention of Asia and Europe contributes to give an imperial dimension to Pharnaces' reign, also recalling the deeds of Mithridates VI, Alexander the Great and the Achaemenids.

The title 'King of Kings' was somewhat devalued in the Late Hellenistic period, when several rulers adopted it simultaneously. Such is the case with the kings of Parthia, Armenia,

nos. 1225–1226; Avram, *Bulletin Épigraphique* 2010, no. 471); Yailenko 2010, 199–204 (*L'Année Épigraphique* 2010, no. 1444). A reference to a King of Kings was found in an amulet from Amisus, although we do not know the ruler to which it relates (Muccioli 2013, 411, n. 100).

⁴ See, in particular, *DB* I.1: 'I am Darius, the Great King, King of Kings'. For a complete relation of the sources regarding the titles of the Achaemenids, see Shayegan 2010, 247–60; and further Griffiths 1953, 148; Engels 2014, 335–36. On the inscriptions of Nemrut-Dagi, see *OGIS* 388, 389, 392; and the critical commentary by Facella 2006, 87–94 (with bibliography). The title 'Great King of Kings' also appears in Hippocrates *Epistulae* 1 (letter of Hippocrates to Artaxerxes II) and 2 (letter of Artaxerxes to Hystanes, satrap of the Hellespont); Smith 1990, 48–51. The Arsacids claimed to descend from Artaxerxes II (see Muccioli 2013, 403 [with sources and bibliography]).

⁵ This denomination was also known in Parthia and Atropatene, and would become frequently used by some later Bosporan monarchs. On Mithridates II and III of Parthia, see *SEG* 7, no. 39; *IDélos* 1581; and the commentary on their coins by Olbrycht 1997, 42–44; Shayegan 2011, 196–207, 238–56; Muccioli 2013, 405–06. On Artavasdes I of Atropatene, see De Callataÿ and Lorber 2011, 438. On the Bosporan kings, see *CIRB* 980, 981, 1048, 1049, 1118, 1122, 1254.

⁶ Appian *Bella civilia* 5. 74; Strabo 13. 3. 8. They ruled over a part of Anatolian Pontus for a short time (see Hoben 1969, 34–39; Olshausen 1980). The emasculation of the young Amisenians, ordered by Pharnaces, was a kind of Achaemenid punishment: Appian *Bella civilia* 2. 91; *Bellum Alexandrinum* 70, *cf.* 41; Ballesteros Pastor 2013a, 189.

⁷ On the inscription, see above n. 1, and further Strabo 11. 2. 11; Luther 2002, 268–69; Engels 2014, 346. On this perspective in Achaemenid and Hellenistic royalties, see Walbank 1984, 66; Tuplin 2010, 290–92; Strootman 2014, 49. Mithridates Eupator also highlighted his rule over both continents (Ballesteros Pastor 2013b, 205).

⁸ Gourova 2014, 44.

Atropatene, Bosporus and, possibly, Pontus.9 To them we should add Cleopatra's sons, who were appointed Kings of Kings by Mark Antony, at the same time that the Egyptian ruler was proclaimed Queen of Kings.¹⁰ If we follow the definition offered by Appian, the status of 'King of Kings' could be applied to those sovereigns who ruled over territories that had their own dynasties.¹¹ Apparently, Pharnaces did not have many reasons to justify the adoption of this title because, in his first years of rule, he seems to have governed only over the Bosporan kingdom. We could recall, however, that Pharnaces' hegemony extended over little dynasts settled around the Cimmerian Bosporus. This sovereignty over peoples of this area of the Euxine and the Maeotis had been highlighted by the Spartocids and would be also exalted by the kings who came after Pharnaces, as was the case of his grandson Aspurgus.¹² Thus, in Bosporan royal inscriptions, it was usual to record the rule over peoples as the Sindi and the Maeotians, and this list was enlarged in the time of Aspurgus. These peoples settled around Bosporus were led by dynasts who frequently appear described as 'kings' in the literary sources. We could bring to mind, for instance, the Sarmatian queen Amage, the Scythian Scilurus, or the rulers of the Aorsi and the Siracoi mentioned by Strabo and Tacitus.¹³ This royal status of chieftains living in the vicinity of Bosporus appears also on inscriptions: such is the case of Palacos mentioned as 'King of the Scythians' in the stele in honour of Diophantus, the Pontic strategos who fought against these barbarians.¹⁴ In sum, Pharnaces could claim his rule over other kings, thus justifying himself as 'King of Kings', and this could explain the frequent use of this title by later Bosporan rulers.

Last of all, another factor that justified this exaltation of Pharnaces as 'King of Kings' would have been his victories over barbarian peoples.¹⁵ This aspect appears repeatedly in the exaltation of several Hellenistic rulers, and it has been particularly related to the adoption of the title 'King of Kings' by the Bosporan Sauromates I.¹⁶ Our problem in this respect is that we know very little about Pharnaces' campaigns.

Pharnaces' assumption of an imperial titulature by 55 BC could be interpreted as a change in his policy: there is an inscription which records the epithet *Philorhomaios* which

⁹ Muccioli 2013, 408. See above nn. 2 and 5. We ignore the exact dates of Mithridates' use of the title 'King of Kings'.

¹⁰ See Muccioli 2013, 413–14; Strootman 2010; 2014, 47.

¹¹ Appian *Syrian Wars* 48, referring to Tigranes II. In a similar sense, see Dio Cassius 63. 4–6; Ammianus Marcellinus 19. 2. 11; Strootman 2014, 52. Nonetheless, some scholars propose that this title was just a claim of legitimacy: Wiesehöfer 1996a, 29, 56, 121, 133; *cf.* Muccioli 2013, 401–09 (with further bibliography).

¹² See, for instance, *CIRB* 39–40, where the title appears 'King of the whole Bosporus, Theodosia and of the Sindi and Tarpeiti and Toreti, and of the Psessi and Tanaiti, the conqueror of the Scythians and Taureans' (Gourova 2014, 41). For other examples, see further *CIRB* 6, 7, 9, 10, 25, 26, 39, 40, 45; Müller 2010, 41. On Pharnaces' rule over these peoples, see Hoben 1969, 16. Hind (1994, 149), justified Eupator's title of King of Kings because he 'ruled over many vassals'.

¹³ Amage: Polyaenus 8. 56; Scilurus: Strabo 7. 4. 3; Aorsi and Siracoi: Strabo 11. 5. 8; Tacitus *Annals* 12. 15. 2; 12. 20. 1.

¹⁴ *SIG*³ 709, ll. 7 and 23.

¹⁵ *CIRB* 29; *SEG* 40, no. 627 (1) (see above n. 1); Engels 2014, 346. On this *topos*, see Strootman 2014, 51.

¹⁶ Saprykin 2000, 48-49.

could be dated towards the beginning of his reign, and this denomination disappeared when Pharnaces took the title 'King of Kings'.¹⁷ In addition to this, the Bosporan ruler renounced to any Greek epithet from that time on. This modification of the royal titulature could represent not only a distancing from Rome, but also a different attitude if compared with the former sovereigns of the Mithridatid dynasty who had borne Greek epithets: Mithridates Philopator Philadelphus, Mithridates Evergetes and Mithridates Eupator Dionysus.¹⁸ There were, furthermore, two Pontic princes who bore Greek surnames: Mithridates Chrestos, Eupator's brother, and Mithridates Philopator, son of Eupator.¹⁹

We do not know the specific reasons for Pharnaces' change of royal title, eliminating the reference to friendship with Rome. We could wonder that Pharnaces had obtained any relevant military success towards 55 BC, perhaps by conquering a part of Colchis, where he plundered the sanctuary of Leucothea (Strabo 11. 2. 17). The absence of the title *Philorhomaios* can be interpreted as a sign of a more independent policy in regard with the Republic. Perhaps the Bosporan ruler had not conceived the project of conquering the Anatolian realm of his father Mithridates Eupator yet, because he got these territories in 47 BC.²⁰ Nonetheless, although Pharnaces held the status of friend of Rome until his death, he could have maintained a reluctant attitude towards the Republic. We know that Mithridates Eupator had snatched some insignia of the Roman legions, which were kept in Bosporus. Pharnaces could have given them back to the Romans, but he decided to retain these trophies in his kingdom; they would be recovered by Agrippa some decades later.²¹ Furthermore, as Saprykin has remarked, Phanagoria lost its role as the centre of an administrative unit under Pharnaces in reprisal for its anti-Mithridatic revolt of 63 BC. It was his decision to place the city under the authority of a royal governor.²²

It is remarkable that the title 'Great King of Kings' was borne by Parthian rulers since the end of the 2nd century BC. This denomination appears related to Mithridates II Arsaces precisely in the Delian *heroon* built by Mithridates Eupator.²³ Thus, we could suspect that Pharnaces tried to imitate the titulature used by this dynasty, all the more when taking into account that one of his sons was called Arsaces. However, we have no evidence to concrete the specific reasons for Pharnaces' choosing of this Parthian dynastic name. We could wonder, indeed, some sort of kinship among Mithridatids and Arsacids, without excluding the possibility of a marriage between a member of the Parthian royal house and a prince (or

¹⁷ On Pharnaces as *Philorhomaios*, see Pavlichenko 2007 (*SEG* 57, no. 704; Avram, *Bulletin Épigraphique* 2008, 420; *L'Année Épigraphique* 2009, 1224), and the reconstruction of an inscription probably dedicated to Queen Dynamis (Arseneva, Böttger and Vinogradov 1995, 217–18; *SEG* 45, no. 1022). This epithet has been deduced from the king's earlier coins, although such interpretation is discussed: Hoben 1969, 15.

¹⁸ See, in particular, Muccioli 2013, 192, 212 with n. 335, 239–41. Regarding these epithets on the Pontic royal coins, see De Callataÿ 1997.

¹⁹ Strabo 10. 4. 10; *IDélos* 1560, 1561; Sullivan 1990, 43; Dundua 2011, 41–43; Muccioli 2013, 199–200.

²⁰ On Pharnaces' war with Rome, see Hoben 1969, 17–25; Freber 1993, 81–83; Heinen 1994.

²¹ Orosius 6. 21. 28; Ballesteros Pastor 2005, 213.

²² Saprykin 2010, 91. On this revolt, see Abramzon and Kuznetsov 2011.

²³ See above n. 5.

princess) of the Mithridatid dynasty.²⁴ We cannot forget the close relationship of the Parthians with Mithridates Eupator: in the abovementioned chapel at Delos appeared the busts of two *philoi* of Mithridates II Arsaces, and Eupator's alliance with this king is attested by Poseidonius and Appian.²⁵ As Olbrycht has remarked, the Arsacid influence is a key factor to understand different aspects of Eupator's policy.²⁶ Anyway, if there was an approach to the Parthians from Pharnaces' side, it could have had something to do with his attitude in regard with Rome, which, as have seen, became more independent towards the last years of his reign.

In short, we can perceive the evolution of Pharnaces' conception of his reign through his titulature. In the first phase of his rule, he took the epithet *Philorhomaios*, but later on he dropped this surname and decided to bear a title that evoked Persian royalty, largely claimed by Pharnaces.²⁷ Although it was above all an aspect of propaganda, the title *Basileus Basileon Megas* revealed Pharnaces' ambitions around the Black Sea, which ended with his conquest of Anatolian Pontus. Caesar's victory over this ruler would end this ephemeral empire, but the designation *Basileus Basileon* remained in the titulature of the Bosporan kings as a tradition compatible with friendship to Rome.²⁸

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Abbreviations

IDélos	A. Plassart, J. Coupry, F. Durrbach, P. Roussel and M. Launey, Inscriptions de Délos
	(Paris 1926–72).
OGIS	W. Dittenberger, Orientis Graeci inscriptiones selectae (Leipzig 1903-05).

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²⁴ The Arsacids did not avoid establishing ties with other Eastern royal houses at that time: Tigranes the Younger, the son of Tigranes II, married a daughter of Mithridates III of Parthia (Plutarch *Pompeius* 33. 6).

²⁵ Appian *Mithridates* 15; Posidonius *FGH* 87 F36 *apud* Athen. 5.213a. On Arsaces' *philoi* at the Delian chapel, see Savalli-Lestrade 1998, 186, 210; Lerouge-Cohen 2014.

²⁶ Olbrycht 2009.

²⁷ Pharnaces ordered the emasculation of the young Amisenians, and this had been a measure proper of the Achaemenids: Appian *Bella civilia* 2. 91; *Bellum Alexandrinum* 70, *cf.* 41; Ballesteros Pastor 2013a, 189.

²⁸ On Bosporan inscriptions joining the epithet *Philorhomaios* with the title 'King of Kings', see *CIRB* 31, 33, 34, 36, 54, 985, 986, 1006, 1021, 1048, 1049, 1052, etc. (leaving aside other examples when the rulers are just called 'Great King'). On this aspect, see above all Funck 1998. On the friend-ship with Rome of Pharnaces and his successors, see further Heinen 1994; 2001; 2007, especially 28–58; 2008, 191–206. On the title 'King of Kings' among the Bosporan rulers of the first century BC, see also Rostovtzeff 1919.

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