

## SOME ASPECTS OF PHARNACES II'S IMAGE IN ANCIENT LITERATURE

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The information we have about Pharnaces II is scant. Apart from his intervention in his father's death and his brief campaigns against Rome, the ancient literary sources say next to nothing about this king. In the scarce remaining accounts on Pharnaces (like that of Appian), he is described as a disastrous epigone of Mithridates Eupator, and as a ruler who did not measure up to his father neither in courage, neither in nobility, nor in military achievement.<sup>1</sup> In this paper we will try to study some evidences that allow us to know several aspects of this king's image in the ancient historical tradition.

Pharnaces was, like so many others, a prince who began collaborating with Rome and ended up fighting against her. He appears mentioned for the first time leading a conspiracy against his father in Bosphorus (64 B.C.).<sup>2</sup> Mithridates forgave him, but Pharnaces rebelled again soon after, and this time he was successful: the prince finished with his father's reign and with the Mithridatic Wars. Pompey was grateful to Pharnaces for his help, and so the Roman general confirmed Eupator's son as king of Bosphorus, although without restoring him his father's

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<sup>1</sup>On Pharnaces' reign, see W. Hoben, *Untersuchungen zur Stellung kleinasiatischer Dynasten in den Machtkämpfen der ausgehenden römischen Republik* (Diss. Mainz 1969) 8ff.; R.D. Sullivan, *Near Eastern Royalty and Rome 100-30 BC* (Toronto 1990) 156 ff. The main sources are App.*Mith.*110-111, 113, 120-121; *BC* 2.91-92; D.C.37.12-14.3; *Bell.Alex.*34-41, 59-76; *Flor.Epit.*2.13.61-63.2

<sup>2</sup>App.*Mith.*110.

territories in Pontus and Colchis.<sup>3</sup> Later on, Pharnaces, taking advantage of the Civil Wars in Rome, conquered the Pontic ancestral domains in Anatolia, and for that reason the image of this king should not be particularly exalted by the ancient historians. In this context, it is necessary to interpret the different traditions which have reached us about the death of Mithridates Eupator: while most authors tell that he committed suicide, others, in particular Cassius Dio, affirm openly that, after attempting in vain to die by poison, the Pontic king was murdered at the hands of the troops loyal to Pharnaces, or by Pharnaces himself.<sup>4</sup> We could think that the divergence between both versions was due to the opposition between a pro-Pompeian tradition (Eupator's suicide for his difficult situation after Pompey's campaign), and another pro-Caesarian one (the cruel parricide by Pharnaces, in aid of Pompey). It is hard, however, to hold this hypothesis: at first sight, both options would contribute to reduce the merit of Pompey, who, as it is known, was accused in Rome of being unable to put an end by himself to Mithridates, taking profit by the weak situation in which Lucullus had left this king.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>App.*Mith.*113, BC 2.92; D.C.37.14.2.

<sup>4</sup>The suicide: App.*Mith.*111; Oros.*Hist.*6.5.6-7; Auct.*Vir.Ill.*76.8; Plu.*Pomp.*41.5; Eutr.6.12.3; Flor.*Epit.*1.40.26; Liv.*Per.*102; Fest.*Breu.*16.1; Iust.37.1.9; Gell.*NA* 17.16.5; Paus.3.23.5; Val.-Max.9.2 ext.3; Servilius Damocrates, *Theriaca* 101-106 (*Poetae Bucolici et Didactici*, Didot, vol.3, p.120); Galen.*De Theriaca* (Ed. Kühn, vol.16, pp.283-284); cf. Lucan.*Phars.*1.335-6; Iuv.*Sat.*6.661-2; Schol.Iuv. *ad Sat.*6.661,10.273; Sidon.*Carm.*7.79-82. Pharnaces is directly accused in: D.C.37.12.4; App.*BC* 2.92; Ioseph.*A.I.*14.3.4; Zonar.5.6, 10.5; Schol.Lucan.Bern. *ad* 1.336; cf. Vell.2.40.10; Schol.Iuv. *ad Sat.*14.252.2. It seems that Dio followed two different sources about Mithridates' end: in 37.13.1-4, this author tells that the king was both self-slain and killed by his enemies; see J.J. Portanova, *The Associates of Mithridates VI of Pontus* (Diss. Columbia 1988) 516 n.794.

<sup>5</sup>Plu.*Pomp.*31.3-7, 41.2; Luc.35.7; cf. Sull.27.8; App.*Mith.*97, BC 2.9; Amm.29.5.33; L. Ballesteros-Pastor, "Aspectos contrastantes en la tradición sobre L. Licinio Lúculo", *Gerión* 17 (1999) 331-343, 332, 340; cf. D. Braund, *Georgia in Antiquity* (Rome 1994) 161-2.

Perhaps just to oppose this view, some sources emphasize on the fact that Mithridates' suicide took place while Pompey was the commander of the Roman power in the East, making this general responsible for the ruler's death.<sup>6</sup>

As Appian tell us (*Mith.*117), in Pompey's triumph a picture was exhibited representing the scene of Mithridates' end. So, it may have been an official version of this episode (the suicide)<sup>7</sup>, that might be very well-known among the Romans, and that would have been reflected in the main ancient sources, with certain variants to get a more colourful account. The suicide to avoid falling in the enemy's hands was regarded as an act of honour. This dramatic event may be, therefore, an aspect of the greatness of Mithridates, who, as in the case of Hannibal, preferred to kill himself rather than an ignominious exhibition in Rome. The suicide of the Pontic king may have been considered as a truthful story, which, from other perspective, agrees with the terrible and impious character that the historical tradition attributed to Mithridates.<sup>8</sup> We must also keep in mind that Pharnaces was acting as an important collaborator in Rome's interests. In fact, he remained officially regarded as a friend and ally of the Roman people until his death.<sup>9</sup> Thus, it would make no sense to accuse Pharnaces of having killed his father.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Cic. *Mur.*16.34: *Pompey (...) illum (sc. Mithridates) vita expullit*; Auct. *Vir.Ill.*77.4: (Pompey) *Mithridatem ad venenum compullit*; Vell.2.40.1; Sidon.*Carm.*7.79-82.

<sup>7</sup>As suggested by D. Magie, *loc. cit.*

<sup>8</sup>On Mithridates' *feritas*, see for instance Sall.*Hist.*fr.1.32, 2.47M; App. *Mith.*113. On his impiety: App.*Mith.*22; Flor.*Epit.*1.40.8; Obseq.56.

<sup>9</sup>H. Heinen, "Mithridates von Pergamon und Caesars bosporanische Pläne. Zur Interpretation von *Bellum Alexandrinum* 78", in R. Günther; S. Rebenich (Hgg.) *E fontibus haurire* (Paderborn 1994) 63-79; Id., "Die Mithradatische Tradition der bosporanischen Könige", in K. Geus; K. Zimmermann (Hgg.), *Punica-Lybica-Ptolemaica. Festschrift für W. Huss, zum 65. Geburtstag*. *Studia Phoenicia XVI* (Leuven-Paris-Sterling 2001) 355-370, 360.

<sup>10</sup>See D. Magie, *Roman Rule in Asia Minor* (Princeton 1950) vol.II, 1229-1230 n.25: the version in which Mithridates is killed by a Gaul "was

Another alternative may be to propose that the story of Mithridates' murder by his son would have come from an anti-Roman tradition (or at least one critical towards Roman imperialism): the parricide was an impious act, and therefore it was a disgrace for the prince, who had been declared recently a friend of the Roman People. At the same time, this version reduced the merit of Pompey's campaign, making it clear that Mithridates, the last champion of the Hellenic East against Rome, would have died from a plot of his own relatives and not from a defeat in the battle field. As Clementoni has shown, Cassius Dio could have followed a source critical towards Rome for his account of the Third Mithridatic War.<sup>11</sup> Although we cannot be sure, as Clementoni, that the source in question may be the work of Timagenes, it is clear that Dio echoes a tradition that diverges from the main one which has reached us. Actually, this bias of Dio's source confers to Mithridates Eupator certain values characteristic of the noble image of the Hellenistic Kingship.<sup>12</sup>

Another piece of evidence which confirms this hypothesis on Dio's

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perhaps adopted in order to save Pharnaces from the odium of having murdered his father". In this same sense, see B.C. McGing, *The Foreign Policy of Mithridates VI Eupator, King of Pontus* (Leiden 1986) 166 n.98. Caesar calls Pharnaces "parricide" in *App.BC* 2.91, but this phrase may have had a metaphorical sense: actually, some sources made clear that the king's suicide was due to the mutiny led by his son. The suicide to avoid falling in the enemy's hands was common in Antiquity: see Y. Gris , *Le suicide dans la Rome antique* (Montr al-Paris 1982) 60 ff.

<sup>11</sup>G. Clementoni, "Cassio Dione, le guerre mitridatiche ed il problema partico", *InvLuc* 7-8 (1985-86) 141-160.

<sup>12</sup>See, in particular, 37.12.3 (wisdom and knowledge of the royal duties); 36.9.2 (recognized by his people as bearer of the ancestral kingship); 37.11.2 (pride and courage). Despite this description of the king, Dio considers Mithridates' troops as "barbarians" (36.12.4; 36.13.1; 36.45.4; 36.47.4; 36.49.6-8; 42.28.2, etc.), and applies this term to the king himself (36.9.4; 42.48.2). Thus, Dio's source may have not been "philobarbarian", in contrast with the bias of Timagenes' work: cf. M. Sordi, "Timagene di Alessandria, uno storico ellenocentrico e filobarbaro", *ANRW* II 30.1 (1982) 775-797.

source could be seen in the location of Pharnaces' battle against Caesar (47 B.C.). The ancient writers locate it in Zela, where, as the *Bellum Alexandrinum* tells explicitly, would have taken place the shameful defeat of C. Valerius Triarius at the hands of Mithridates in 67 B.C.<sup>13</sup> Dio is the only author who points out a different site for this important success of Mithridates: it would have been in Gaziura, a town located in the same region, but more to the North, beside the Lycus river.<sup>14</sup> The difference between both versions is obvious: *Bellum Alexandrinum* 72 places Triarius' battle in the highest of the hills around Zela, which was "little more than three miles" from the city. Nonetheless, the highest hill is actually placed eight miles to the North, as was pointed out by A.G. Way in the edition of this work in the *Loeb Classical Library*. Our other sources do not make clear the exact location of Mithridates' battle against Triarius, but it seems evident that this episode happened in a different point than that of Caesar's victory. We must regard that Dadasa, the fortress where Triarius' troops had left the booty and that they hurried to defend from the Pontic attack (D.C.36.12.2-3), was farther to the North, after crossing the Lycus. Thus, it is clear that Caesar, highlighting a false coincidence of battle fields, sought to appear as the avenger of the most

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<sup>13</sup>*Bell.Alex.72: Circumpositi sunt huic oppido (sc. Zela) magni multique intercisi vallibus colles; quorum editissimus unus, qui propter victoriam Mithridatis et infelicitatem Triari detrimentumque exercitus nostri magnam in illis partibus habet nobilitatem...; 73: (sc. Caesar) ipsum locum cepit, in quo Mithridates secundum proelium adversus Triarium fecerat; Plin.NH 6.10; App.Mith.120; Plu.Caes.50.2; Liv.Per.113.*

<sup>14</sup>D.C.36.12. See A.G. Way, *Caesar. Alexandrian, African and Spanish Wars* (Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge Mass. 1955) 126 n.2 *ad loc.* Our sources do not make clear the exact site of the battle against Triarius. For the location of those places, see E. Olshausen; J. Biller, *Historisch-geographische Aspekte der Geschichte des Pontischen und Armenischen Reiches. Teil I.* TAVO B 29/1 (Wiesbaden 1984) 63ff. Dio (42.47.1) states that Caesar's battle took place near Zela, but, at the same time, this writer tells that Mithridates' victory over Triarius was commemorated in a different point (42.48.2). Dio (36.12.4) describes Triarius' battle near a river, which may be the Lycus.

ignominious defeat that Mithridates had inflicted on a Roman army, and therefore as the restorer of Rome's honour in the far Eastern borders of the Empire.

Triarius' failure must have been very hard for Rome, not only due to the great number of losses suffered by both the troops and the officers, but also because it was probably in this battle when Mithridates snatched from the Roman armies some of the insignia which, according to Orosius, were in the hands of some people of Bosphorus until they were recovered by Agrippa.<sup>15</sup> Pharnaces would have kept those insignia hidden, and the secret may have passed to some of his relatives. Perhaps, after Pharnaces' death, it was assumed that this ruler had been behind the secret of these emblems. So, Lucan's allusion to the "impious insignia of Pharnaces" (*impia signa Pharnacis*) could not refer properly to those of this king<sup>16</sup>, but to the emblems which his father had taken from Triarius. This charge of "impiety" would not refer therefore to Pharnaces' parricide (because it does not appear clearly reflected in the *Pharsalia*), but to those aforementioned insignia. We must bear in mind that, like in Crassus' debacle, the disastrous result of Lucullus' campaign, as well as that of Triarius, was attributed to these generals' excessive desire for fame and fortune.

The Roman historians would have also spread other negative views of Pharnaces. Among these points of view would be to consider him as a prince of ignoble lineage, born of one of Mithridates' concubines called Stratonice. There is a lot of evidence to support such a hypothesis: if after

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<sup>15</sup>Oros.*Hist.*6.21.28: *Bosforanos vero Agrippa superavit et signis Romanis, quae illi quondam sub Mithridate sustulerant, bello recuperatis victos ad deditionem coegit.* More than 7.000 Romans died in Gaziura, and among these were 150 centurions and 4 tribunes (Plu.*Luc.*35.1; cf. *Pomp.*39.1).

<sup>16</sup>Lucan.*Phars.*10.475-476. J.D. Duff, *Lucan. The Civil War* (Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge Mass. 1928) 627, translates those words as "the unnatural warfare of Pharnaces", and explains his version saying that "Pharnaces had rebelled against his father, Mithridates" (p.626 n.1 *ad loc.*). Cf. Lucan.*Phars.*1.335-336: *lassi Pontica regis proelia barbarico vix consummata veneno.*

being defeated by Caesar in 47 B.C. Pharnaces was 50 years old (App.*Mith.*120), it would mean that he was born around 103 B.C. So, he could not have been the son of Laodice, whom Mithridates had put to death c. 108 B.C.<sup>17</sup> Neither could Pharnaces have been the son of Monime, a Greek woman to whom Mithridates married in 88 B.C. And neither could he be the son of Hypsicrateia, who is depicted as a young woman in 66 B.C.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, as Portanova observed, Appian and Orosius affirm that Pharnaces was the brother of Machares. Being the latter the brother of Xiphares, which appears clearly mentioned as son of Stratonice, it would mean that Pharnaces was the son of this same concubine.<sup>19</sup>

If we admit that Stratonice was Pharnaces' mother, Plutarch's passage on this concubine could have been taken from a text against this king. This episode is an *excursus* of the *Life of Pompey* (36.3-6): Plutarch tells that Stratonice was the daughter of an old poor harpist. After having played for Mithridates in a party, the king took Stratonice to his bed that night. The following morning, when the father woke up, he saw his house filled with many eunuchs and servants who had brought him rich gifts. Mithridates had also given the girl's father a great house, purple robes and a horse richly harnessed, like those of the royal *phíloi*. The old musician, at the beginning unbelieving, put on the purple robes and, mounting the horse, he rode through the city crying: "All this is mine". Plutarch notes to his readers that he inserts this tale to make known "of such stock and lineage was Stratonice".

This passage could not only be regarded as an anecdote that reflects the low status of women in the court of Mithridates, who, with the exception of Laodice, his sister and first wife, did not marry again women of royal blood. Furthermore, it would be another episode to reduce the dignity of the Pontic king, who was described in the ancient sources as a

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<sup>17</sup>Iust.37.3.7; 38.1.1; Sall.*Hist.*fr.2.76M; L. Ballesteros Pastor, *Mitrídates Eupátor, rey del Ponto* (Granada 1996) 55-56.

<sup>18</sup>Laodice: Iust.37.3.7, 38.1.1; Sall.*Hist.*fr.2.76M; Monime: App.*Mith.* 21; Hypsicrateia: Plu.*Pomp.* 32.8; Val.Max.4.6 ext.2.

<sup>19</sup>App.*Mith.*107, 113; Oros.*Hist.*6.5.4; cf. D.C.37.12.1; J.J. Portanova, *op. cit.*, 316-317, 371.

lascivious man (App.*Mith.*112; Plu.*Pomp.*37.2), according to his image as *impius bellator*: that is, a soldier who does not observe the divine rules, who is eager for wealth and who does not respect women's virtue.<sup>20</sup> If Pharnaces were the son of Stratonice, it would mean that this king was actually a bastard, bearer of a vulgar lineage, and so he lacked the ideal image of a Hellenistic ruler. In this sense, we must regard that this same unworthy blood was attributed to other princes or kings who are presented under a negative view in the sources: Perseus of Macedon was allegedly born from a laundress; Aristonicus, grandson of another harpist; Nicomedes IV of Bithynia, a dancer's son. Thus, we meet with a *topos* in ancient historiography: discrediting enemy princes as unworthy women's sons, and therefore lacking the nobility of blood which all kings should have. As Will pointed out, the Late Hellenistic period is plenty of bastards or false princes: Orophernes, Alexander Balas, Andriscus, etc.<sup>21</sup>

Although the purity of lineage was one of the concerns common to both the Achaemenids and the Macedonian sovereigns, the unworthy origin of these women did not simply rest in their status of concubines, but in particular in their job of dancers. The image of these women was especially disdained in the Roman world. Let us remember as a significant example the case of Sempronia, whom Sallust (*Cat.*25) reproaches harshly for her love to dance beyond that which was allowed to a honest woman.<sup>22</sup> Sempronia's attitude was contrary to the chaste image of the Roman *matronae*. Another negative aspect in Plutarch's passage can be found in the attitude of Stratonice's father. Plutarch portrays him as a

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<sup>20</sup> On this concept, see F. Blaïve, *Impius bellator. Le mythe indo-européen du guerrier impie* (Arras 1996).

<sup>21</sup>Perseus: Liv.29.54.4; 41.23.10; Plu.*Aem.*8.11-12; *Arat.*54.7-8; Aelian. *VH* 12.43; Aristonicus: Iust.36.4.6; Plu.*Flam.*21.10; Eutr.4.20.1; Nicomedes: Iust.38.5.10. See further É. Will, *Histoire Politique du Monde Hellénistique* (Nancy 1967) vol. II, 316.

<sup>22</sup>B. Boyd, "Virtus effeminata and Sallust's Sempronia", *TAPhA* 117 (1987) 183-201; E. Gunderson, "The History of Mind and the Philosophy of History in Sallust's *Bellum Catilinae*", *Ramus* 29.2 (2000) 85-126. In general, M.P. Guidobaldi, *Vita e costumi dei romani antichi* (Rome 1992) 26 ff.



humble man delighted by his sudden change of fortune, which he proclaims gone mad through the whole city. This unbridled love of wealth would also constitute a feature characteristic of the barbarian behaviour, in contrast to the temperance that, according to the classical morality, all civilized men should observe.<sup>23</sup>

That vulgar filiation of Pharnaces should have been in consonance with his perfidious attitude towards Rome. But, at the same time, showing the low origin of Pharnaces' mother was a means to emphasize the lineage of Mithridates of Pergamum, because he was born of a woman of royal blood: Adobogiona, the daughter of Deiotarus, the Galatian tetrarch, who was considered by the Romans as a true king. In this sense, the Caesarian propaganda would justify and give legitimacy to the imposition by Caesar of this Galatian prince as king of Bosphorus.<sup>24</sup>

In fact, Pharnaces was king by accident. Although he was aged enough to have been designated previously as successor, our sources do not tell anything about him until many of his brothers had already died at the hands of Mithridates. In 65 B.C., the Pontic king did not have many alternatives to appoint a heir to the throne, and he was practically forced to designate this son. Pharnaces, for what it seems, did not have previous military experience. Perhaps for that reason he used obsolete military tactics, such as fighting with scythed chariots that had been formerly discarded by his father after the defeats suffered against Sulla. Actually, those chariots were not used in the Third Mithridatic War.<sup>25</sup> Caesar's boast regarding his quick and easy victory (*veni, vidi, vici*), would have

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<sup>23</sup>See Y.A. Dauge, *Le Barbare. Recherches sur la conception romaine de barbarie et civilisation* (Bruxelles 1981) 463, 613 ff., 634 ff. Compare the harpist's sentence with Sen.*Ben.*7.3.3: *Haec omnia mea sunt!*

<sup>24</sup>H. Heinen, "Mithridates...", sp. 68 ff. For Deiotarus' title of king, see D. Magie, *op. cit.*, vol. II, 1235 n.40.

<sup>25</sup>On Pharnaces' scythed chariots, see *Bell.Alex.*75. Lucullus showed twelve scythed chariots in his triumph (Plu.*Luc.*37.3), although they may have been taken from Tigranes or from other barbarian kings: our sources affirm explicitly the use of Roman weapons and tactics by the Pontic army in the Third Mithridatic War (Plu.*Luc.*7.4-5; D.C.36.13.1; App.*Mith.*87; cf. 89).

been a way to depreciate the capacity of Eupator's son, although he had begun with successes, and he had even posed in great difficulties to Caesar himself.<sup>26</sup>

A misleading king as Pharnaces should provoke biased interpretations of his behaviour. In spite of Pharnaces' propaganda as "King of Kings", the Roman sources minimized his reign and his character.<sup>27</sup> To that interpretation joined, probably, some Greeks, nostalgic of the heroic times in which Mithridates Eupator arose in the hearts of many peoples the hopes on a defeat of Rome. These Greeks could not forgive the perfidious son who had put to death to his own father, the great Pontic ruler, when he still had strength enough to continue fighting.

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<sup>26</sup>*Bell.Alex.77: maximum bellum tanta celeritate confecerat, quodque subiti periculi recordatione laetior victoria facilis ex difficillimis rebus acciderat.*

<sup>27</sup>Cf. *Cic.Fam.15.15.2; App.BC 2.92; Vell.2.55.2; Flor.Epit.2.13.62.* Appian (*Mith.120*) describes Pharnaces' courage. On Pharnaces' title "King of Kings", see R.D. Sullivan, *op. cit.*, 387 n.39.