The Ancient History Bulletin

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ANCIENT HISTORY BULLETIN

Volume 33 (2019) Numbers 1-2

Contents of volume thirty-three

Numbers 1-2

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Mithridates VI Eupator and Persian Kingship
Andrea F. Gatzke

Abstract: *Mithridates VI Eupator is often regarded as a thoroughly Hellenized ruler, especially during his wars with Rome, when he made every effort to gain Greek supporters. While some scholars have discussed Persian aspects of the king's ideology, there has been little attempt to understand the relationship between Mithridates' Hellenism and his Persianism. This paper argues that Mithridates aimed to refashion Hellenistic kingship, which had thus far failed at curbing Rome's eastward expansion, by openly incorporating elements of Persian kingship alongside more traditional Hellenistic methods of rule. Through this, he hoped to fashion himself as a new kind of dynast who would serve as the protector of all residents of the east – Greek and non-Greek – against the threat of Rome.*

In an often overlooked passage from Pompeius Trogus' *Philippic History*, unusually preserved in full in Justin's *Epitome*, Mithridates VI Eupator Dionysus of Pontus (r. 120-64 BC) brags to his troops about the superiority of the peoples of the Anatolian interior, claiming that:[1]

> earum se gentium esse, quae non modo Romano imperio sint pares, sed Macedonico quoque obstiterint. Nullam subiectarum sibi gentium expertam peregrina imperia; nullis umquam nisi domesticis regibus paruisse, Cappadociam velint an Paphlagoniam recensere, rursus Pontum an Bithyniam, itemque Armeniam maiorem minoremque; quarum gentium nullam neque Alexander ille, qui totam pacavit Asiam, nec quisquam successorum eius aut posterorum attigisset.

> He was at the head of nations who were not only equals to the power of Rome, but who had even thwarted the Macedonians. [He said] that none of the nations who were subjects of him had endured foreign domination, nor had they submitted to any rulers except their native kings; and that whether they surveyed Cappadocia or Paphlagonia, or Pontus or Bithynia, or likewise greater and lesser Armenia, they would find that neither that famous Alexander, who subdued all Asia, nor any of his successors or those afterwards, had touched any of those nations.

Mithridates implies here that Pontus was superior to Rome, the Hellenistic kings, and even Alexander the Great because its peoples had been able to resist the yoke of these most

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[1] Just. 38.7.1-2.

renowned imperial powers and conquerors, past and present. Pontus was exceptional, he claimed; and as its king, he was also exceptional. Such were the messages disseminated by the Pontic king in the years leading up to and during his wars with Rome. These messages, and others, seem to have been successful, as Mithridates found support among a wide array of peoples, from Armenia and the kingdoms of the northern Euxine to the cities of Asia and Greece and even the Italic groups resentful of Rome's mistreatment of them. Even in Athens, which had a long history of anti-monarchic politics, Mithridates was embraced and he was included as co-magistrate on the coins of the tyrant Aristion in 87 BC, the first royal name ever to appear on the city's coinage.[2]

In order to appeal to as wide a support network as possible, Mithridates drew on a variety of tactics to make himself the most viable opposition to Roman expansion in the east. Among these tactics were Mithridates' efforts to disrupt the traditional models of kingship that had recently dominated the Hellenistic world by developing and promoting a Persian royal past for himself that could coexist with many of the philhellenic precedents set by his forebears. Further, his claims of legitimacy relied not on his recent predecessors, but rather hearkened back to more distant Macedonian and Persian rulers—Alexander, Seleucus I, Cyrus II, and Darius I—who had created and expanded empires, not simply inherited them.[3] Mithridates' emphasis on his ancestry, and in particular his Persian ancestry, was no coincidence; this dual genealogical claim was a key component of Mithridates' royal self-fashioning. He used it to harness the legendary might of both Persian and Macedonian conquests in the region and to show himself as the culmination of the two strongest empires of the region's past. Through the Persianizing of the Pontic royal house, Mithridates' reign thus marked a significant shift in the conception and execution of kingship in the late Hellenistic period, a new approach which would, he hoped, prove a stronger bulwark against the growing power of the Romans, whom he considered the "common enemies of all" (τοὺς κοινοὺ[ς πολε] | μίος . . . Ῥωμαί<ους>).[4]

This renegotiation of monarchic power in late Hellenistic Anatolia was fitting and timely, as the mighty kingdoms of the Hellenistic period had been overshadowed by a new power in the west—Rome. In the decades preceding Mithridates' accession, Rome had defeated the Antigonids, neutered the Seleucids and Ptolemies (one through war, the other through diplomacy), and inherited the Kingdom of Pergamum upon the death of its king. In response to these significant power shifts in the Mediterranean, Mithridates cast himself as the future; as a universal monarch who would protect the peoples of the Hellenistic world—Greek and non-Greek, western and eastern—from the encroaching threat of Rome and her republican system.

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[2] Head 1880, 113 no. 14; Thompson 1961, nos. 1143-46. The evidence for anti-Roman sentiments among residents of Greece and Anatolia appears throughout the ancient sources, though not every city ended up supporting Mithridates. Mithridates also appealed to other barbarian groups who had been resisting Roman expansion into their own regions, such as the Bastarnae and the Sarmatians: Memnon 22.8, 10; 27.6; Sall. *Hist.* 4.69.5-8 Maurenbrecher; App. *Mith.* 48, 57, 62-3; Just. 36.4.6-12; Cass. Dio 36.9; Posidonios, *FGrHist* 87 F 36 (Ath. 5.211d-215b); Diod. Sic. 37.27; Welles 1934, 295-9, nos. 73-4. The Bastarnae were particularly keen on curbing Rome's expansion after the invasions of Scribonius 75-3 BC (App. *Mith.* 15, 41, 69, 71; Memn. 27.7; Just. 38.3.6). According to Appian (*Mith.* 112) and Diodorus (37.2.11), Mithridates even acquired groups of Italians and Gauls as allies against Rome.

[3] Just. 38.7.1; Sall. *Hist.* 2.73 Maurenbrecher; App. *Mith.* 112; cf. Ballesteros Pastor 2013, 275-80.

[4] Welles, 1934, 295 no. 74 = *SIG*[3] 741.

For certain groups threatened by Rome's expansion, monarchy was familiar and comfortable, and well worth preserving.[5] But monarchy was also up for interpretation since clearly the Macedonian monarchies had failed to curb the spread of Rome's influence. This failure of Hellenism enabled Mithridates to experiment with new expressions of kingship in order to maximize his public image, appeal, and support against Rome.

Eupator saw particular promise in adopting Persian styles of administration and ideology that had been dismissed as politically poisonous in the post-Alexander world of Hellenism. These Persian elements, which included new titles and mythological motifs, were intended to highlight Mithridates' descent from the region's past royalty. Where his predecessors had claimed descent only from the Persian nobility, Mithridates tied himself more directly to the illustrious Achaemenid rulers Darius and Cyrus themselves.[6] The genealogical ties were most certainly fabricated, but they were not without meaning for Mithridates and his subjects (and I imagine he would not have manufactured such ties to the past if they did not bear meaning and functionality).[7] These genealogical claims created continuity between Mithridates and the Achaemenid forebears, and tied him to a royal past that had come to be revered, if not also critiqued, in the Greek world.

In fact, Mithridates' understanding of Persia and Persian royal traditions would have been heavily influenced by the representations made by Greek writers such as Herodotus and Xenophon and passed down through the Hellenistic period. As a result, the reception of Achaemenid Persia in the late Hellenistic period was far from a facsimile of the actual historical Achaemenids. Instead, it represented a mnemohistorical Greek interpretation of Persian traditions and ideologies. For the Anatolian kingdoms such as Pontus, as well as Commagene and Cappadocia, who also claimed ties to the Achaemenids, everything they knew about their supposed Achaemenid ancestors had been filtered through a Greek interpretation and modified to fit a Greek perspective of the Persian past. This Persianism was distinctly different from that of Arsacid Parthia further east, which had a greater claim to the Persian past, as it controlled the traditional heartland of the Persian empire, including Babylon, Susa, and Persepolis, but did not have the same access to Achaemenid or Greek historical texts or cultural memory beyond the scattered royal inscriptions.[8] The Arsacid royal ideology relied much more on aspects of Alexandrian and Seleucid kingship for legitimization. It is for this reason that Strootman and Versluys have encouraged the use of the term Persianism, as opposed to Persianization, to explain the revival of Persian cultural traditions in the context of

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[5] Both Cass. Dio (36.9.2) and the *Epistula Mithridatis* from Sallust (*Hist.* 4.69.5-8 Maurenbrecher) show that the preservation of independent monarchy was one of the important factors in Mithridates' opposition to Rome, or at least understood to be so by Romans in the period following the wars.

[6] Before Mithridates' reign, the ancient sources tie the Pontic house to one of the seven Persian noble families who overthrew the usurper Gaumata, see Polyb. 5.43.1-4; Flor. 1.40.1. Later sources name him as the descendent of the Persian kings: n. 3 above. The account of the seven nobles (Hdt. 3.61-88; Aesch. *Pers.* 775-781; Str. 15.3.24; Just. 1.9.7-10, 14; Joseph. *Ant. Iud.* 9.31) was most likely a fabrication to justify Darius' seizure of the throne, but the Behistun inscription makes clear that it was an official part of his propaganda: cf. D'Agostini 2016, 85-6.

[7] Meyer 1879, 31-8; cf. Bosworth & Wheatley1998 for alternate views of these claims. This genealogy was still being claimed four generations later by his descendant T. Julius Mithridates (Tac. *Ann.* 12.18.4).

[8] Engels 2014, 343; Canepa 2017, 203-4.

the Hellenistic world in the last two centuries BC.[9] The invented nature of these traditions does not mean that they lacked meaning. That is, in fact, precisely how invented traditions function: "to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past."[10] For Mithridates, it mattered little whether his use of pseudo-historical Persian ideas were truly Persian (and he probably thought they were!); what mattered was that they held meaning for his audience, and would serve to connect him to the great Achaemenid founders.

Of course, Mithridates was not the first or only king to integrate Persian ideology into his rule. Persian monarchic traditions had greatly influenced Macedonian kingship as early as the reign of Alexander himself, but reactions to these elements, especially among the Greco-Macedonian nobility, had been negative. As a result, Alexander's successors made these Persian features more palatable to Greek subjects by folding them into a "more modest-looking Macedonian tradition of kingship," and adapting them, "to Greek morality, philosophy, and religion." This allowed the Hellenistic rulers to benefit from the precedents set by the Persians and their forebears while simultaneously distancing themselves from the conquered Achaemenid dynasty.[11] Even the Seleucid line, which was descended in part from Persian nobility through Seleucus I's marriage to Apama at Susa, only ever emphasized their Macedonian ancestry in their royal iconography and ideology.[12] This process further distanced the memory of Persia from the actuality of the Achaemenid period and allowed for a development of an invented Persian tradition.

Mithridates' reign marked a significant shift in the utility of Persianism and its relationship with Hellenism in the late Hellenistic east by openly embracing Persian culture and incorporating Persian royal ideology into his own self-fashioning. Pontus had always been open about its noble Iranian heritage—Polybius mentions Mithridates II's descent from one of the seven noble Persian families on the occasion of his marriage to a Seleucid princess,[13] with the implication that his noble blood made the union of the two families natural and fitting. The Iranian heritage was also broadcast from the earliest Pontic coinage in the form of the star and crescent, a symbol whose meaning is not fully understood but which probably refers to the celestial themes that were central in Iranian royal ideology.[14] The shift under Mithridates Eupator was the claim to royal blood—none of the Pontic rulers claimed to be descended from Achaemenid royalty, and the family's Iranian heritage did little to gain the early Pontic kings power in a region where Hellenism reigned supreme. Thus, they relied on cooperation with

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[9] Strootman and Versluys 2017, 18, who define Persianism as an invented tradition that was less a response to the historical Persia and more a cultural memory rooted in the political and social context of the late Hellenistic period.

[10] Hobsbawm 1983, 1; cf. Otto 2007, who surveys several other definitions of invented tradition and himself defines invented traditions as existing to legitimate new practices, not existing ones (48).

[11] Strootman 2014, 7; cf. McEwan 1934.

[12] According to Arrian (7.4.6), Apama was the daughter of Spitamenes of Sogdiana; Strabo (12.8.15) calls her the daughter of Artabazus of Bactria. Cf. Strootman 2017, 178.

[13] It is first seen in Polybius (5.43.1-4) in relation to Mithridates II; cf. D'Agostini 2016; cf. Hdt. 3.61-88.

[14] It has varyingly been interpreted as a dynastic badge, a symbol of Iranian-Persian ancestry and cosmic kingship, or a reference to the cult of Ma or Ahuramazda: cf. Price 1968, 3; McGing 1986, 97 n. 51.

and support of the Hellenistic kingdoms in order to exercise and increase their power.[15] In addition to intermarrying with the Seleucids,[16] the Pontic kings adopted the Greek language for their official correspondence, adopted Greek-style royal coinage for trade and for paying mercenaries, and in the reign of Pharnaces, whom Saprykin calls the first truly philhellenic Pontic ruler, they established a new capital with a Hellenistic-style royal court in the Greek *polis* Sinope.[17]

Much scholarship on Mithridates focuses on his continuation of these philhellenic traditions, casting him as the ultimate philhellene. Not all scholars agree with this view, however, and so there is great debate within Pontic scholarship about the degree to which the rulers and the kingdom were truly philhellenic or Iranian. Because of this hyper-focus on the "Hellenistic nature" (or the lack thereof) of Mithridates' rule, scholars have been quick to polarize the issue, arguing for *either* a Persian-style or a Hellenistic-style reign.[18] There has been little attempt to develop a more nuanced understanding of innovation and experimentation within these multicultural traditions or to explore how Hellenism and Persianism worked together to portray Mithridates in a new way. But if we let go of the model that views the king as either one or the other, it becomes clear that Eupator engaged *both* of these cultures equally and openly. If Hellenistic kingship can be seen as a re-packaging of Persian kingship into more acceptable Hellenic terms, we should view Mithridates Eupator's reign as marking the unpacking of those Persian elements and revealing them for what they were.

Mithridates and Pontus are not the only Iranian kingdoms in the second and first centuries BC which have been analyzed according to this Greek-Persian binary. Similar limitations have affected our understanding of the kings of Commagene. Facella has pointed out that particularly with regard to Antiochus I Theos of Commagene, scholars have tended to focus too much on distinguishing the Persian elements of the king's monuments from the Greek elements, thereby overlooking what she sees as a conscious portrayal of himself as a product of his dual Seleucid-Achaemenid descent. According to Facella, Antiochus emphasized this duality not only to legitimize his reign, but also to create a "foundation of his cultural and

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[15] D'Agostini 2016, 92; *cf.* Erciyas 2006, 14; Engels 2014, 336-41.

[16] These marriages began with Mithridates II around 240/239 (Porphyr. *FGrH* 260, F 32.6 = Euseb. *Chron.* I p. 251 Schoene), and lasted until Pharnaces I married the Seleucid princess Nysa (*OGIS* 771) c. 160/159. The lineage of Eupator's own mother, Laodice, is unknown, but it has been suggested that she was also a Seleucid, based on the implications in Just. 38.8.1; *cf.* Reinach 1895, 41; McGing 1986, 38; Ballesteros Pastor 1996, 31.

[17] Saprykin 2007, 197, though it was also Pharnaces who first abandoned the Attic standard in favor of a new Pontic monetary system (Casey 2010, 6-7). Ballesteros Pastor (2005) argues that the Pontic kings from Pharnaces onward were actually client-kings of Rome. At the very least, Mithridates V Euergetes, Eupator's father, was a loyal ally of Rome and assisted them in their conflicts with both the Carthaginians and Aristonicus. *Cf.* App. *Mith.* 57; Just. 37.1.2; 38.5.3.

[18] For example, Portanova (1988, 167-410) gauges Pontus' position in the Hellenistic world based on how philhellenic or not Eupator was at a given phase in his reign. Mitchell (2005, 530) casts Pontus as the oriental Persian counterpoint to the thoroughly Hellenized "European" Attalids. McGing (1986, 89-108) cites the king's philhellenism as the most important "weapon" for his successful expansion. For others on Mithridates as a dedicated philhellene, see Olshausen 1974; Ballesteros Pastor 1996, 402-442; Ballesteros Pastor 2009, 217; Fleischer 2009, 117-18.

religious project" by projecting himself as possessing a divine nature and convincing his subjects to accept a new dynastic cult in honor of himself and his Greek and Persian forebears and co-deities.[19]

Commagene presents a different set of challenges to scholars than does Pontus, especially since Antiochus Theos' extensive building program has left behind a wealth of evidence for Commagenean royal ideology that has no parallel in Pontus. As is well known, Mithridates and his predecessors spent little time building up their kingdom culturally; rather, they focused construction efforts on building rural palaces and fortresses to help protect their borders in the Anatolian interior and to oversee the many rural towns scattered across the rugged countryside.[20] This focus on functional development highlights the unique needs of the Mithridatids in contrast to their other Hellenistic neighbors, whose flourishing cities and cultural centers provided a wealth of opportunities for building palaces, temples, and diverse communities.

The unfortunate result of this dearth of archaeological sources—architectural and epigraphic in particular—is that we must rely on what small fragments of Pontic evidence we do have: coins, limited inscriptions, and Roman literary sources. This third category has been the most problematic, as historians have struggled to discern with certainty the degree to which Roman sources accurately portrayed the Pontic king and his messaging. Most notable here are the speech of Mithridates preserved in Trogus, quoted above, and the so-called *Epistula Mithridatis* preserved in a fragment of Sallust's *Histories*. The Roman historians both portray these texts as genuine vestiges of Mithridates' own communications and reflections of his actual attitudes and strategies in his wars against Rome. However, these texts have been questioned by modern scholars, and interpreted as pure creations of their Roman authors designed to fit the themes of their respective histories. While this may be the case, especially for Sallust, whose interest in highlighting Rome's rapaciousness and greed is widely established in the scholarly literature,[21] it is worth taking the underlying arguments of these texts, if not the actual words themselves, as genuine vestiges of Pontic propaganda, received through the Roman writers of the late Republic.

There is no doubt that Mithridates would have disseminated anti-Roman messages over the course of the wars, if not also in the years preceding the wars, and it is also certain that Romans would have been aware of that Pontic propaganda and its content. There are ample reasons to question the genuineness of Mithridates' speech as transmitted by Trogus, including questions about how Trogus acquired a speech given to Pontic soldiers, how these soldiers in a large army would have been able to even hear or understand the exhortations of

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[19] Facella 2005, 88-9. For more on Antiochus I Theos' cult, see Brijder 2014, 164-9.

[20] Michels 2017, 48. These palaces and fortresses housed soldiers, civilians, and royal treasures, and certainly would have seen population growth, commerce, and cultural exchange, but as most were located on the frontiers of the kingdom or along strategic trade and travel routes, they were fundamentally military in nature and indicative of the king's expansionist priorities.

[21] Fronto (*Ad Verum* 2 p. 124 van den Hout) believed that the *EM* was, at least in part based on real Pontic argumentation; cf. Raditsa 1969, 6-9 and 310-14; McGing 1986, 154-61; Adler 2006 argues that the letter is wholly a composition of Sallust, fitting well into the Roman historian's regular criticisms of Rome's *cupido imperi*; cf. Syme 1964, 250; Earl 1966, 109.

an unamplified king, or whether certain points even make sense to include in a speech to general troops. However, it is not so much important here whether the speech in this particular format and composition is genuine—it most likely is not—and more whether the speech represents the arguments that Mithridates was making in the course of his conflicts with Rome—it most likely does. The speech is particularly noteworthy because of its length— Justin directly quoted three of Trogus' speeches in his epitome, and the speech of Mithridates is by far the longest.[22] This is not insignificant. Whereas the shorter speeches were further removed from Trogus' lifetime, Trogus was separated from the wars with Mithridates by only a few decades and reasonably could have heard about Mithridates' propaganda and anti-Roman rhetoric from his grandfather, who fought under Pompey. I do not mean to imply that the content of Trogus' speech is completely genuine to a speech of Mithridates—his justification for using *oratorio obliqua* implies that even he acknowledged that he could not represent the speech completely accurately.[23] He is interested in presenting the gist of a speech, possibly not even a real one, to display his knowledge of Pontus' accusations against Rome.[24] These accusations would have been filtered through Roman eyes and through the politics of the late Republic and Augustan era, periods during which absolute monarchy were heavily criticized (despite Augustus' essential monarchy of his own). But the core of the arguments made by Trogus' Mithridates are easily identifiable as Pontic argumentation.[25] Mithridates' speech was filled with challenges to Rome's supremacy and respectability and with efforts to glorify himself as the only possible champion of Asia's resistance. Adler's conclusion that Trogus himself was not anti-Roman is not in conflict with this interpretation of the speech, as we can assume that any anti-Roman sentiments in the speech belong to Mithridates himself. As will be shown, Eupator's claims in Trogus about his supremacy and his position as the defender of the Greek and Asian world against Rome are echoed enough elsewhere in the sources to suggest that Trogus' speech did indeed reflect Mithridatic propaganda.[26]

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[22] The other two speeches are Just. 28.2.1-13 (Aetolians) and 29.2.2-6 (Demetrius of Illuria).

[23] Just. 38.3.11.

[24] Yardley (2003) has convincingly argued that the speech in Justin preserves the original composition of Trogus. For arguments that the speech is based to some degree on pro-Pontic sources, see Ballesteros Pastor (2013); McGing (1986, 160); and Richter (1987, 178-82). In contrast, Adler (2011, 38-39) argues that the speech's similarities to two other speeches of Trogus, also preserved in Justin, as well as its similarities with Sallust's *EM*, suggest that it was truly a creation of Trogus.

[25] Adler's 2011 study of the speech identifies several spots in the passage where the point that Mithridates makes is undercut elsewhere in Trogus' history, but while Adler uses this as evidence that such arguments would have had little impact on Roman readers of Trogus' history (55), he overlooks the fact that they could have easily had significant impact on the average soldier fighting under Eupator.

[26] Most notably, Welles, 1934, 295 no. 74 = *SIG*³ 741, in which Mithridates calls the Romans the 'common enemy of all.' See also Just. 37.1.6-7, where he says Mithridates' greatness surpassed all kings of his own period and of earlier periods: *cuius ea postea magnitudo fuit, ut non sui tantum temporis, verum etiam superioris aetatis omnes reges maiestate superaverit*; Cass. Dio 36.9.

Mithridates and Persian Royal Ideology

While much of Mithridates' royal messaging, especially his coins and royal portrait, is often interpreted as the apex of his Hellenism, reflecting his desire to cast himself as a new Alexander, elements of Persian royal ideology saturated many aspects of Mithridates' self-fashioning. Legends surrounding Eupator's birth involving comets and lightning strikes are reminiscent of the Persian royal associations with celestial bodies and cosmic power.[27] In the Iranian tradition, the king was not considered divine himself, but was of divine makeup, often associated with the sun or moon, and especially fire, as he was believed to have "descended from heaven as lightning in a column of fire."[28] Stories circulated that Mithridates was struck by lighting in his crib, and that the sky was on fire for more than two months in the year of his birth, and again in the year of his accession. These birth legends appealed to these Iranian traditions, while simultaneously putting the king in the company of Alexander of Macedon,[29] Dionysus, and Mithra, all of whom had similarly fiery birth stories.[30] These connections between Mithridates and two gods was made all the more clear through his full name, which incorporated both of the deities into it. When the giant comet from Mithridates' birth year reappeared on the eve of the his accession to the throne, it was likely interpreted as a sign that the period of his rule was a sort of "rebirth" of Pontus and sanctioned by the gods.[31] The associations of Iranian religion in these stories would not have been lost on residents of Mithridates' kingdom, as Iranian religious traditions were well established in Pontus.[32]

Another example of Mithridates' adoption of Persian royal ideology appears in an inscription from Nymphaion in the Chersonese.[33] The inscription, found on a base whose statue no longer survives, records the Greek city's praise of Eupator for protecting them from the Scythians. The text refers to Mithridates as *Βασιλεὺς Βασιλέων*, a traditional title for many

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[27] Just. 37.2 says that a comet appeared in the year that Mithridates was born, and again in the year that he took the throne. Plutarch (*Mor.* 624a = *Quaest. Con.* 1.6.2) says that on the day of Mithridates' birth, there was a storm over his cradle and he was struck by lightning, leaving a scar on his forehead that he covered with his hair. A similar thunderbolt supposedly struck his bedchamber in his adulthood, burning the arrows in his quiver; cf. Briant 2002, 240, 243-5. For Persian cosmology and royal ideology, see Hdt. 1.131; Polyae. 7.11.12; Nic. Dam. *FGrH* 90 F66.41; Briant 2002, 204-54; Widengren 1959, 245-6, 250.

[28] Widengren 1959, 245.

[29] Plut. *Alex.* 2.2.

[30] Dionysus was struck by lightning while still in his mother's womb: Eur. *Bacc.* 1-3; Plut. *Quaest. conv.* 1.6.2; Just. 37.2.1-3; Dio Chrys II.294. The Zoroastrian deity Mithra was believed to have been born in a cave from a descending star. Many prophesies of the late Hellenistic period had anticipated the return of Mithra in human form, and this "Great King" was to be announced in part by his miraculous birth: Widengren 1959, 248-9, 253.

[31] Widengren 1959, 253.

[32] E.g. the cult of Anaïtis in Zelitis: Str. 11.8.4; cf. Michels 2017, 45-6; Mithridates' sacrifice to Zeus Stratios (Persian Ahuramazda), which was performed in a manner similar to the Persian kings' sacrifices at Pasargadae: App. *Mith.* 66.

[33] *SEG* 37.668; the text was originally reconstructed in Yailenko 1985.

eastern dynasts starting in sixteenth century Assyria up through the Achaemenids.[34] The precise meaning of this title in the Near East has long been debated: earlier scholarship posited that it was tied to control of a particular geographical region—Babylon, perhaps, or Mesopotamia more generally[35]—but more recently scholars have argued that its definition was less precise and reflected the king's godly attributes and his control over all of the local rulers within a large feudal state.[36] The title appears among contemporary eastern kings, most notably the Arsacids of Parthia, the would-be successors to the Achaemenids in the East, who first revived the title under Mithridates II (r. 124/3-88/7) at a time when the overstretched resources of the growing Parthian state forced them to increase their feudal organization.[37] Using "King of Kings" helped them emphasize the Parthian king's supremacy and power over the minor kings below him. In Mithridates' own time, Tigranes II of Armenia also claimed the title, as seen frequently in both literary and archaeological evidence.[38]

In the case of the Nymphaion inscription, Ballesteros Pastor has argued that the title has little real meaning. In his view, Mithridates was Hellenistic through and through, and the use of an eastern title like "King of Kings" was simply a reflection of the king's propaganda rather than a reference to any real claims to eastern-style kingship.[39] Engels likewise argues that the king's philhellenic program makes it unlikely that he would have used such a title.[40] It may be true that the title Βασιλεὺς Βασιλέων held little personal meaning for the population of Nymphaion itself, as it had never been common in the northern Euxine or among the Greek cities,[41] but if that is the case, it must have come from somewhere else. If we examine the inscription in the framework of Mithridates' embracing of Persian ideology alongside Hellenistic ideology, this inscription provides an interesting piece of evidence for the king's employment of his Persian past in his ideology and propaganda.

Because the Nymphaion inscription is the only evidence of this title from the period of Eupator's reign, it is difficult to know the extent to which Mithridates actually used this title. However, comparative evidence from Parthia and from Mithridates' descendants allows us to explore the possibility that the use of the title here was not an isolated occurrence. First, the title does not appear on any of Mithridates' coins, which are our best source for his royal self-fashioning. This was also the case for Phraates III of Parthia. "King of kings" did not appear on

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[34] Engels 2014, 334. It has also been reconstructed as saying "Great King" or "Great King of Kings": Engels 2017 60-1.

[35] Babylon: Bevan 1902, 241; western Asia: Minns 1915, 38.

[36] Griffiths (1953, 146) first argued that the title had no precise significance in terms of territorial sovereignty. More recently, on the title's connections with semi-divinity (similar to the Egyptian title *pharaoh*), see Engels 2014, and 2017, 35-6, 59.

[37] Minns 1915; Engels 2014, 342-5.

[38] Memnon 31.3; cf. App. *Syr.* 48; Plut. *Luc.* 14. For full discussion of evidence, see Engels 2014, 348-51; 2017, 65-6, who dates the earliest use of this title to 80 BC.

[39] Ballesteros Pastor 1995, 116-17; cf. Engels 2017, 62.

[40] Engels 2017, 62-3.

[41] Greeks were likely familiar with the title, but never used it themselves, always referring to the Persian king as "Great King": Engels 2014; Plischke 2017.

his coins either, but we are told he used it in his diplomatic correspondences.[42] There is also the possibility that the title was used primarily for oral communication, as Engels has postulated for the Parthian kings,[43] and that the Nymphaion inscription is a reflection of this informal titulature. Second, the title appears among Mithridates' descendents. An inscription from Agrippeia (Phanagoreia) commemorates the marriage of Dynamis, who is identified as the daughter of the "Great King" Pharnaces and granddaughter of "King of Kings" Mithridates (Eupator).[44] The title also appears attached to Mithridates' son Pharnaces II in both numismatic and epigraphic evidence.[45] The persistence of this title suggests that it held actual meaning, even if imprecise, in Pontus and was integrated into the family's broader royal ideology. Engels has suggested that the title's usage by Pharnaces II is much more believable than by Mithridates since the former was the king of the Bosporus Kingdom, not Pontus, and did not have to consider philhellenic factors as much as his father.[46] But this explanation gives too much weight to the philhellenic acts of Eupator and ignores the many ways in which he openly incorporated elements of Iranian-Persian ideology into his public image as well. In addition, if Molev's proposed date of 106/5 for the inscription is accurate, in which case it would commemorate the victory of Neoptolemus over the Scythians,[47] this inscription would date to relatively early in Mithridates' reign, a period in which his efforts at philhellenism were not yet in full force, and in which his court was still largely Iranian in makeup.[48] Indeed, Mithridates' victories against the nomadic tribes of the northern Euxine had been key to his early expansion into that region. He was called upon by the inhabitants of the Chersonesus and Bosporus to help them against the Scythians, and after the successful campaigns there under his general Diophantus (c. 107),[49] Mithridates had unparalleled bragging rights: none of his predecessors, Macedonian or Persian, had managed to secure such a significant victory against these nomadic tribes.[50] Thus, this victory confirmed the king's image as a dynast who could protect his subjects from incessant barbarian incursions.[51]

The title "King of Kings" certainly would have distinguished Mithridates from his Hellenic predecessors and contemporaries, none of whom had adopted this particular title. The Seleucids adopted other aspects of Persian royal ideology, including the title "Great King," but

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[42] Plut. *Pomp.* 38.2.

[43] Engels 2014, 343; 2017, 58.

[44] *IOSPE* II 356 = *IGR* I 905: [β]ασίλισσαν Δύναμιν φιλορώμ[αιον] | [τὴ]ν ἐκ βασιλέω[ς μ]εγάλου Φα[ρνάκου] | [το]ῦ ἐκ βασιλέως βασιλέων Μιθ[ραδά] | [το]υ Εὐπάτορος [Διο]νύσο[ο]υ

[45] Anokhin 1980 no. 216 & 220; *CIRB* 28; *CIRB* 92.

[46] Engels 2017, 62-3.

[47] Molev 2009, 322. Others date the inscription later, associating it with his conquest of Asia Minor and Greece: Shayegan 2011, 228, 244.

[48] Portanova 1988, 557, who elsewhere argues (591) that the king's philhellenism does not really take center stage until the period of 88-85.

[49] *IOSPE* I[2] 352.

[50] Just. 37.3.2; 38.7.3-5.

[51] Just. 37.3.2; *IOSPE* I[2] 352 ll. 1-9; cf. McGing 1986, 51.

never did they call themselves "King of Kings."[52] This phrase presented Mithridates as something different, something more comprehensive, and possibly even something divine. It reconfirmed the messages of the miraculous events surrounding Eupator's birth and accession which established him as a divinely sanctioned ruler and a champion of all peoples. Such imagery would have been particularly effective among Pontus' eastern subjects and allies, especially Parthia, who were likewise of Iranian descent and had similar affinities for Near Eastern traditions. In the context of Eupator's annexation of the Bosporan kingdom, Colchis, and portions of Anatolia, the title fit perfectly with his new feudal-style rule, allowing him to advertise himself not only as a ruler of Pontus, but also as a ruler of other kingdoms subjected to him.

Mithridates and Mythological Motifs

These various aspects of Persian kingship ideology saturated the stories of Mithridates' young life and the presentation of his kingship to his subject states. However, the centrality of this Persian identity to his royal ideology is most evident on his coinage, which borrowed from Hellenistic and Persian traditions and introduced new subjects and themes that highlighted Mithridates' multi-ethnic identity. The king's coins varied greatly in different regions and periods of his reign, and his new styles tended to appear alongside older types that he continued to produce. For example, in Thrace, Mithridates maintained the production of Macedonian coins, as can be seen with the Lysimachus-types.[53] In Asia, his royal and civic issues made use of traditional Hellenic motifs, including Greek deities. In Colchis and the Crimea, we see the use of Perseus and Pegasus, mythological figures closely associated with both Greek and Persian traditions that were popular there. And on all of his royal issues appeared the traditional Pontic star and crescent, which first appeared on the coins of Mithridates III and persisted on all successive Pontic royal issues.

With the variation in types across his empire, Mithridates' coins have been the focus of many debates about the king's philhellenism and Persianism. Yet the flexibility in his choice of subjects on his coins, on the one hand, and his innovative incorporation of new subjects and styles alongside traditional types on the other, shows that while he certainly borrowed from both Greco-Macedonian and Persian traditions, the Pontic ruler was more concerned with disseminating symbols of power and victory than with portraying himself in any kind of established framework of kingship or ethnic identity. This creative approach to coinage is best seen in his employment of Perseus, Pegasus, and Medea throughout his realm. Before Eupator's reign, Perseus rarely appeared on coins in Anatolia and the eastern Mediterranean during the

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[52] Engels 2014, 340. The only appearance of "Great King" under the Seleucids is in the cuneiform Borsippa Cylinder of Antiochus I, and the meaning of the title here is highly debated. See Sherwin-White & Kuhrt 1993; Strootman 2013; Kosmin 2014; Engels 2014, 338; Plischke 2017.

[53] E.g. Imhoof-Blumer 1910, nos. 2477-85.

late Hellenistic Period.[54] Perseus was a fresh face and a perfect heroic model for Mithridates: he was popular throughout Anatolia;[55] he was the ancestor of both the Persians and Alexander of Macedon, and therefore of Mithridates himself;[56] he was even popular among the Seleucids and the Antigonids, serving as a model of urban foundations and conquests.[57] He did not fully belong to Greece, Macedon, or Persia, making him an ideal symbol for transcending the definitions, or perhaps geographical limitations, of kingship.[58] Perseus was, in essence, the perfect symbol for a Hellenistic ruler who aimed to serve as a liaison between Greeks and Persians in Asia, just as Mithridates hoped to do.

The fact that Perseus appeared on a variety of civic and royal issues throughout Mithridates' area of influence shows that the hero was not intended to be an exclusively Persian or Greek symbol. In Sinope and Amisus, both Greek cities with a large number of influential Greek courtiers and businessmen, the civic types bore Greek subjects, such as Zeus, Ares, and Athena at the time of Mithridates' accession.[59] These types continued under Mithridates, but they were joined by a series of new types featuring Perseus, who was otherwise unprecedented in the coinage of these cities. Two of these types appeared early in Mithridates' reign,[60] and three more were added early in the war, dating mostly from the period of 85-65 BC. Of the wartime issues, two bear allusions to Perseus' defeat of Medusa,[61] surely meant to reference Mithridates' own (hopeful) defeat of Rome. The third type depicts a grazing Pegasus on the reverse, and on the obverse, the head of Perseus wearing a Phrygian-style helmet, or *kyrbasia*—a traditional symbol of Iranian kingship—rather than the more traditional winged helmet of Hermes.[62] Some have argued that Perseus' facial features on these

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[54] The only exception in Pontus is his appearance on one coin of Mithridates IV: Waddington 1904, 12 no. 6. He appears in fifth century Cyzicus (Brett 1974, no. 1548; *LIMC* Perseus no. 16; cf. Ogden 2008, 119) and on the tetradrachms of Philip V and Perseus in Macedon from 221-168 (Head 1967, 233, 235, and fig. 146).

[55] E.g. Imhoof-Blumer 1902 vol. 2, 417; cf. Ogden 2008, 119-21. Perseus was especially important in Tarsus: Robert 1977, 96-129.

[56] As the ancestor of the Persians: Hdt. 7.61.3; 7.150.2; *Schol. Dion. Per.* 1053; of Alexander: Arr. *Anab.* 3.3.2. It is possible that, by claiming this blood connection, Eupator hoped to lay claim to the Persian empire just as Xerxes had before him: Hdt. 7.150; Bosworth 2000, 48.

[57] Ogden 2008, 118-20; McGing 1986, 94-5; cf. Malalas pp. 36-7 Dindorf.

[58] McGing 1986, 95. Others have interpreted Mithridates' use of Perseus as an attempt to emphasize his Persian heritage alone: cf. Price 1968, 3-4; H. Pfeiler 1968, 77 nos. 10, 12.

[59] Wroth 1889, 15-17, nos. 22-49.

[60] These both depicted the head of a young Perseus with the winged helmet on the obverses: See Wroth 1889, 6 no. 2, 19 nos. 65 and 68, and 100 no. 45.

[61] The first type (*SNG BM* Black Sea 1166 – 69) displayed a helmeted Athena on the obverse, and on the reverse Perseus holding Medusa's head, a scene similar to those on the earlier coins from Cyzicus. This type appears in Amisus, Sinope, Comana, Cabeira, and Amastris. The second type (*SNG BM* Black Sea 1177-1179) bore the aegis with the gorgon's head in the center, with the reverse depicting Nike holding a palm, likely a reference to Mithridates as victor. It appears in Amisus, Sinope, Cabeira, Laodiceia, Amastris, Chabacta, and Comana.

[62] *SNG BM* Black Sea 1135-1138. The *kyrbasia* was common on the coins of the Persianised Arsacid dynasts under Seleucid rule, and emulated the coins of the Anatolian satraps in the later Persian period: Strootman 2017, 187-8. Though this motif is borrowed by Mithridates, it appears primarily in the city of Amisus, a Greek city firmly under the control of Mithridates, and so seems to have been divorced from its earlier representations of limited territorial rulership as discussed by Strooman.

coins are strikingly reminiscent of Mithridates' own portrait and meant to actually show the king as the hero,[63] but any similarities are superficial and inconsistent, and probably reflect more the unintentional influence of contemporary royal portrait styles on coin artists rather than any particular directives from the king himself to put his face on Perseus.[64]

The role of Pegasus in the coinage of the Mithridatic period varies according to location and context. A variation on one of the coin types from Amisus and Sinope seems to prioritize an Iranian theme by replacing the usual Pegasus—a Greek detail of the Perseus myth—with a quiver, which may have been a reference to the importance of hunting in Iranian royal ideology,[65] or to the quiver from Mithridates' bedroom which, according to the legend, was struck by lightning.[66] Elsewhere, Pegasus appears as a symbol of Mithridates himself. In Asia, Mithridates' gold and silver royal coins bore Pegasus on the reverse up until around 89/88, at which point the mythological animal was replaced with a stag. The shift to the stag at the start of the war with Rome has been interpreted as evidence that the king's need for Greek support required him to drop his earlier Persian symbols in favor of more Hellenized ones, such as the stag of Ephesian Artemis. However, Pegasus also appears on the reverse of coins in Athens under the reign of the tyrant Aristion, a clear reference to Aristion's support of Mithridates, showing that Pegasus was a perfectly acceptable symbol in the Greek world.[67] The change from Pegasus to stag in Asia should thus be understood as a move toward local tradition rather than an attempt to appear more philhellenic, as can be seen in other parts of Mithridates' realm as well.[68] In addition, the significance of the stag was not exclusively Ephesian, Artemisian, or even Greek; the animal had ties to Pontus and the east as well. As Price himself has shown, a stag appears on the reverse of Pharnaces I's royal types, probably in reference to hunting.[69] The animal also had longstanding ties to Macedonian and Iranian kingships, especially through their emphasis on hunting and horsemanship,[70] and even appears regularly in Bronze and Iron Age Anatolian art,[71] so to cast the change from Pegasus to the stag as a move toward philhellenism ignores the animal's broader cultural significance in Anatolia and Persia.

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[63] Wroth 1889, 18 no. 59. This coin also appears in Chabacta and Taulara: Wroth 1889, 18-19, nos. 60-64. Similar arguments have been made about coins with Heracles minted under Mithridates VI: McGing 1986, 200, 375-82; Wroth 1889, xxvii.

[64] Højte 2009, 149-50.

[65] McGing 1986, 95.

[66] See n. 27 above.

[67] Hill 1906, 160-3; Thompson 1961, nos. 959-89.

[68] Price 1968, 3-4. For the history of the stag on Ephesian coinage, see Mundell 2011. Other motifs that have often been interpreted as evidence of Mithridates' philhellenism, but which really are reflections of his continuations of local traditions, include the Lysimachus-types in Thrace (n. 53 above) and the Heracles types in the Black Sea littoral. For Heracles in the coins of the Spartocid dynasty, see MacDonald 2005, 99; Wroth 1889, xxx; in Odessos and Mesembria, see Callataÿ 1997, 115; Price 1991, no. 1029, 1159.

[69] See Price 1968, 3; Wroth 1889, xxv. The obverse pictures a nature-type deity that seems to be a blend between Hermes, Dionysus, and Tyche.

[70] Hdt. 1.136.2; the Alexander Sarcophagus from Sidon (Ist. Arch. Mus. 370 T); cf. Cohen 2010, esp. 30-8, 82-93.

[71] There are numerous examples of the stag in second- and first-millennium Anatolia. See for example Gurney 1958 and 1977; Hellenkemper and Wagner 1977; Loon 1985; Koehl 1995.

Mithridates' use of Dionysus shows a similar interest by the king to introduce fresh and unique symbols on his coins that bridged Greek and eastern culture. Eupator's association with the god is well established—he bore the title "Dionysus" and was hailed as such by his supporters.[72] Like Perseus, Dionysus first appeared on the coins of Sinope and Amisus during Mithridates' reign. Also like Perseus, Dionysus was a Greek deity with deep connections to Anatolia and further east, both historically (especially via Alexander of Macedon) and mythologically.[73] He was also a leader of armies, a bringer of freedom, and a sponsor of rebellion, all of which were useful attributes for Mithridates to draw upon.[74] Mithridates' association with Dionysus served well the king's ambitious goals of crafting a new, universal empire. The king's portraits on his royal issues depicted him in Dionysian features, appearing as a young and dynamic ruler, quite unlike his Pontic, Macedonian, or Iranian predecessors, all of whom relied on far more standardized and rigid portrait styles.[75] It is perhaps not a coincidence that the only comparable coin portrait (and possibly the model for Mithridates' portraits) was the coinage of Diodotus Tryphon, a Seleucid usurper who himself had aimed to establish an entirely new dynasty with no ties to his immediate Seleucid predecessors.[76] Dionysus was a symbol of dynastic disruption, of rebellion, and even though he was a Hellenic deity, his eastern associations would not have been lost on Mithridates' Greek or Asian audience.

Mithridates' New Kingship

Despite Mithridates' adoption and manipulation of features of Hellenistic and Persian kingship that he deemed most useful, the king was not interested in fitting himself into preceding models of rule. The Macedonian kingdoms had all been weakened beyond repair, and Mithridates had little reason to try to cast himself in their shadow. Persia—or at least the memory of Persia—was well positioned for a comeback since its defeat was already several centuries in the past and Persia's main detractors were now on their way out. Mithridates' self-presentation and royal ideology show that the ambitious king was interested in disrupting these traditional expressions of power by developing a new model of kingship that would appeal broadly to all peoples, unifying them in their fear over the growing influence of Rome in the east. As the last major obstacle to Rome's eastward expansion, and the last major independent monarch in a region that was long-accustomed to monarchic rule, Mithridates had the freedom to play with methods of rule that best suited him and were most effective

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[72] *BCH* 8 (1884), 103; Cic. *Flacc.* 60; Posidonios, *FGrH* 87 F 36 (Athen. 5.212d); Plut. *Quaest. Conv.* 1.6.2; McGing 1986, 90 n. 5.

[73] Cf. Eur. *Bacc.* 13-63; Burkert 1985, 163. Following the conquests of Alexander, Dionysus' origins were placed even further east, in India: Arr. *Anab.* 5.1-2.

[74] Dionysus played a major role in several slave revolts in the late second and first centuries BC because of these associations with rebellion and freedom: Plut. *Crass.* 8.3; Diod. Sic. 34.2, 36.4; Strauss 2010, 194-5; Saprykin 2009, 263-4.

[75] See for example McGing 1986, 93-9; Price 1968; Højte 2009; Erciyas 2006, 146-62.

[76] Fleischer 2002, 69; Smith 1988, 122.

over a diverse and extensive population. In order to craft this new royal image, he adopted traditions and symbols of power that would resonate with the various local populations, especially those of Greek or Iranian descent, while also popularizing symbols that had had little contemporary use. He did this openly, promoting his dual heritage as a strength rather than a liability. It was not simply his philhellenism, but also his Persianism, that gained him popularity and support throughout the lands of Asia, Greece, and Italy.

Mithridates recast himself for a new, cosmopolitan world that rejected the Greek-Persian binary. Influenced by the culture of the Hellenistic period in general, and the Seleucid kingdom in particular, which had adopted many elements of Persian culture into their Greco-Macedonian worldview, Mithridates took off the blinders and revealed Hellenistic royal culture for what it was—a hybrid of imperial Persian, Hellenic, and local traditions. With him at the helm of Pontus, he fashioned himself as an improved conqueror, with divine connections and mixed heritage, destined to unite the civilized cultures of Greeks and Persians against their new western foe.

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