

Ethnic Constructs, Royal Dynasties
and Historical Geography
around the Black Sea Littoral

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SEARCHING FOR THE SANCTUARY OF LEUKOTHEA IN KOLCHIS

Altay Coşkun

To Mackenzie Lewis, who left us too early

Abstract: Strabo mentions a sanctuary of Leukothea, together with an Oracle of Phrixos, in the *Moschike* somewhere in Kolchis (11.2.17f. 498f.C). O. Lordkipanidze (1972) suggested a location in modern Vani at the confluence of the Sulori and Rioni (Phasis) Rivers. In contrast, D. Braund (1994) proposed an area farther to the east in the Lesser Caucasus (Moschian Mountains), southwest of Borjomi, in the valley of the upper Mtkvari River (Kyros). Both identifications are difficult to accept. First, Ino, the wife of the Theban king Athamas and stepmother of Phrixos, called Leukothea after her *apotheosis*, was a sea goddess. As such, her cult was widespread along the northern coast of the Mediterranean. Its only attested branch in the Black Sea region should therefore not be sought in the hinterland or far-away mountains. Second, Strabo's indications do not point to a location east of the mouth of the Phasis, but rather south of it, where the westernmost foothills of the Lesser Caucasus reach the sea. Third, we can now contextualize Strabo's historical references in detail: the sack of the sanctuary by Pharnakes II occurred after his defeat at Zela in Pontos by Caesar and before his final battle against Asandros near Pantikapaion. Since both battles occurred within no more than a month, Pharnakes had no time to march through the Kolchian hinterland, let alone to lay siege to its fortifications, when sailing back to Pantikapaion in August 47 BC. As a result, the Leukotheon most likely stood out as a landmark for sailors on their way from Trapezus to Phasis. The Mtsvane Kontskhi ("Green Cape"), which is now covered by the Batumi Botanical Garden, might have been an ideal location, and the hills of Tsikhisdziri would offer a feasible alternative.

Абстракт: В поисках святилища Левкофеи в Колхиде: Страбон упоминает святилище Левкофеи вместе с Оракулом Фрикса в «Москике» где-то в Колхиде (11.2.17f. 498f.C). О. Лордкипанидзе (1972) предположил, что это место находилось в современном Вани у слияния рек Сулори и Риони (Фазис). В отличие от него, Д. Браунд (1994) предположил, что оно находилось в регионе намного дальше на восток, в Малом Кавказе (горы Мошиан), к юго-западу от Боржоми, в долине верховья реки Мтквари (Кирос). Обе идентификации трудно принять. Во-первых, Ино, жена фиванского царя Атамаса и мачеха Фрикса, называемая Левкофея после ее апофеоза, была морской богиней. Таким образом, ее культ был широко распространен вдоль северного побережья Средиземного моря, поэтому его единственную аттестованную ветвь в Черноморском регионе не следует искать во внутренних районах или в далеких горах. Во-вторых, показания Страбона указывают не на местоположение к востоку от устья Фазиса, а на юг от него, где самые западные предгорья Малого Кавказа достигают открытого моря. В-третьих, теперь мы можем подробно описать упоминания Страбона об исторических событиях: разграбление храма Фарнаком II произошло после его поражения от Цезария в Зеле в Понте и перед его последней битвой против Асандра под Пантикапеем. Поскольку оба сражения произошли в течение месяца, у Фарнака, при возвращении в Пантикапей в августе 47 г. до н.э. не было времени пройти через внутреннюю часть Колхиды, не говоря уже о том, чтобы осадить ее укрепления. В результате Левкофейон, скорее всего,



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выделялся как ориентир для моряков на пути из Трапезунда в Фазис. Мцване-Концхи («Зеленый мыс»), который в настоящее время находится на территории Батумского ботанического сада, возможно, был идеальным местом для святилища, а холмы Цихидзпри можно считать возможной альтернативой для его локализации.

I. INTRODUCTION: THE LEUKOTHEION IN THE CONTEXT OF STRABO'S *GEOGRAPHY*

The sanctuary of Leukothea is among the few *realia* of ancient Kolchis mentioned in the preserved literary tradition. Strabo of Amaseia has encapsulated two references to it in his account of the landmasses between the Black and Caspian Seas. Beginning with the Tanaïs / Don in the north, the geographer introduces his treatment of Asia with a brief outline of the largest mountain ranges, waters and peoples of the region, before going into more detail. The second chapter starts with a description of the Tanaïs and gradually introduces the (Asian parts of the) Bosporean Kingdom as far as the foothills of the northern Caucasus.¹ The flight of Mithradates VI Eupator from Pontos to the Bosporos in 66 BC provides an elegant transition to the exposition of Kolchis.² Strabo starts by surveying the coastline of the eastern Black Sea from the Bosporos to Sinope, before presenting yet another overview of the area's mountain ranges. Next comes a section on Dioskurias to the south of the northernmost outliers of the Caucasus, which, at the same time, forms the northern part of Kolchis.³ Then he describes the Kolchian coast, centering on the Phasis River, i.e. the modern Rioni (though only as of Rhodopolis / Geguti) and its homonymous city at its mouth.⁴ This section ends with a few lines on the Leukotheion, which I here present in an English translation adapted from the Loeb edition:

Above the aforesaid rivers in the Moschian country lies the temple of Leukothea, founded by Phrixos, and the Oracle of Phrixos, where a ram is never sacrificed; it was once rich, but it was robbed in our time by Pharnakes, and a little later by Mithradates of Pergamon.⁵

- 1 Strab. *Geogr.* 11.1 (490–492C) and 11.2.1–12 (492–496C). For a general survey of Strabo's *Geography*, see now Roller 2018, esp. 629–684 for book 11.
- 2 Strab. *Geogr.* 11.2.13 (496). On Eupator's flight in 66 BC, also see App. *Mith.* 101.463–102.477; Ballesteros Pastor 1996, 269; Biffi 2010, 119–124; Roller 2018, 638f.
- 3 Strab. *Geogr.* 11.2.14f. (496f.C) and 11.2.16 (497f.C).
- 4 Strab. *Geogr.* 11.2.17 (498C). The identity of the Kolchian Phasis with the Rioni is widely accepted, see, e.g., Braund & Sinclair 1997/2000, BA 87; Dan 2016. But Lordkipanidze 1996, 101–105, 247 (cf. 38–41) and 2000, 9–36 points to a tradition represented by Eratosthenes and Strabo (*Geogr.* 11.2.17f. [498f.C]) that the Phasis was navigable until Sarapana / Shoropani and originated in Armenia. Lordkipanidze thus identifies the Kvirila River as the middle course of the Phasis between Shoropani and Geguti, opting for the Dzirula River (coming from the north-east) as the upper course of the Phasis. However, a broad ancient tradition claims an Armenian source, which recommends the Barimela River. This has its spring in the Lesser Caucasus and unites with the Dzirula into the Kvirila at Shoropani. See Coşkun 2019c.
- 5 Strab. *Geogr.* 11.2.17 (498C), translation adapted from Jones 1924. For the Greek text, see below, n. 47. I render Strabo's *hieron* with the more neutral term 'sanctuary' (with Roller 2014,



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The first of the two plunderers is king Pharnakes II, son and successor of the aforementioned Mithradates Eupator, whom he dethroned in 63 BC at the end of the Third Mithradatic War. The Roman supreme commander Pompey had acknowledged his rule only in the Bosporan Kingdom. Pharnakes therefore waited for an opportunity to re-incorporate Kolchis and Pontos into his realm. He took his chances when Rome was plunged into a civil war, but Caesar defeated him at Zela on 2 August 47 BC and compelled him to retreat. His situation was exacerbated by the revolt of Asandros in the Bosporan Kingdom, and he fell while fighting against the insurgent. Caesar refused to accept the succession of Asandros, and saw the turmoil in the North as an opportunity to promote his friend Mithradates, the son of a priest from Pergamon and a princess from the Trokmian Galatians. He made the Pergamene Mithradates tetrarch of the Trokmoi in central Anatolia and further appointed him king of the Bosporos. The pillage of the sanctuary in Kolchis is the last we hear of this Mithradates. He must have died in the course of 46 BC, either in combat with Asandros or on his march up north.⁶

After these historical notes on the Leukotheion, Strabo touches in passing on the famous myths of Jason and the Argonauts as well as Phrixos. The account is unusually short, perhaps because he had dealt with them in more depth before.⁷ He shows a bit more interest in the historical kings of Kolchis, most prominently the aforesaid Mithradates Eupator, in which context Strabo pays homage to his mother's uncle Moaphernes, who had served as the king's governor in the area. The short historical outline ends with Queen Pythodoris, who ruled during the author's time. An additional clarification of geopolitics mentions the Leukotheion again:

Now the Moschian country, in which is situated the sanctuary, is divided into three parts: one part is held by the Kolchians, another by the Iberians, and another by the Armenians. There is also a small city in Iberia, the City of Phrixos, the present Ideëssa, well fortified, on the confines of Kolchis.⁸

Strabo somewhat misleadingly speaks of a 'Moschian country'. In the Augustan period, *Moschike* no longer referred to a territory inhabited by a Moschian population, since it had ceased to exist by the Hellenistic period. The term rather denoted the mountain range now usually called *Lesser Caucasus* or *Meskhete* according to a Georgian local tradition.⁹ The second chapter of Strabo's eleventh

482 and Radt 2004, 307) instead of Jones' 'temple' (thus also Hamilton & Falconer 1903/6) or even 'Tempelstadt' (Lordkipanidze 1996, 251). We do not know how the sanctuary looked.

6 See Coşkun 2019a and forthcoming a on the chronology. For further details esp. on Pharnakes and Asandros, see below, Argument 3. For general information on the kings, see, e.g., Heinen 1994; Ballesteros Pastor 2008/19a; 2008/19b; 2017.

7 See esp. Strab. *Geogr.* 1.2.37 (46C), on which see below, ns. 34 and 51.

8 Strab. *Geogr.* 11.2.18 (499C), quoted below, n. 47; translation adapted from Jones 1924.

9 See Strab. *Geogr.* 11.2.1 (492C); 11.2.15 (497C); Plin. *NH* 6.10.28: *per convalles autem proximi Armeniae sunt Menobardi et Moscheni*; 6.10.29: *Colchicae solitudines, quarum a latere ad Ceraunios verso Armenochalybes habitant et Moschorum tractus ad Hiberum amnem in Cyrum defluentem et infra eos Sacasani et deinde Macerones ad flumen Absarrum*. Cf. Herrmann 1933, 351; Roller 2018, 639; 642. According to Lordkipanidze 1996, 151, they seem to have originated in the eastern parts of the Lesser Caucasus, before expanding westwards around



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