

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

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## QUEEN DYNAMIS AND PRINCE ASPURGOS IN ROME?

Revisiting the South Frieze of the *Ara Pacis Augustae* (13/9 BC)

*Altay Coşkun & Gaius Stern*

*Abstract:* The Senate voted to build the *Ara Pacis* to welcome home Augustus after restoring order in the western provinces, while Agrippa pursued a similar mission in the East. Agrippa had settled the turmoil in the Bosphorus by arranging for Queen Dynamis to marry King Polemon of Pontos, thereby uniting the two realms. Brian Rose (1990) explained that two boys on the *Ara Pacis* who do not wear togas are foreign princes in Rome in 13 BC exactly when Augustus and Agrippa returned from their foreign tours. Rose considered the older boy on the south frieze an eastern prince, probably Aspurgos, the future king of the Bosphorus. He speculated that Queen Dynamis had come to Rome with Agrippa, and that she is the woman who puts her hand on the boy's head. Rose exposed the frailty of Giuseppe Moretti's theory, who regarded the two boys as Gaius and Lucius Caesar dressed as Trojans. We agree with Ann Kuttner, Gaius Stern, John Pollini, Ilaria Romeo that the boys are barbarians, not Romans, but cannot accept the identifications with Dynamis and Aspurgos, (1) on prosopographical lines, because the placement of Dynamis on the *Ara Pacis* relies upon identifying her as the mother of Aspurgos, which claim the ancient sources do not support; (2) on practical terms, since Dynamis should have stayed in her kingdom to help Polemon consolidate his new throne (not speculation but positive evidence would be needed to counter this view); (3) iconographically, as the woman on the *Ara Pacis* does not closely resemble the image of Dynamis; (4) because Dynamis was a mature, middle-aged queen by 13 BC, as her portrait on two gold staters indicate, whereas the *Ara Pacis* teenager is far too young. She is actually Agrippa's least famous daughter, wearing not a diadem, but a brill appropriate for a Roman teenage girl close to marrying age. Her hand is resting on the head of a Parthian prince, a 'guest' in Rome, hosted by the family of Agrippa.

*Абстракт: Динамия и принц Аспург в Риме? Возвращаясь к южному фризу Алтаря Мира Августа (13/9 г. н.э.):* Сенат проголосовал за создание Алтаря Мира, чтобы приветствовать Августа на родине после восстановления порядка в западных провинциях, в то время как Агриппа выполнял аналогичную миссию на Востоке. Агриппа подавил беспорядки на Босфоре, договорившись о том, чтобы царица Динамия вышла замуж за Понтийского царя Полемона, тем самым объединив два царства. Брайан Роуз (1990) объяснил, что два мальчика на Алтаре Мира, которые не носят тоги, являются иностранными принцами, которые пребывали в Риме в 13 г. до н.э. именно тогда, когда Август и Агриппа вернулись из своих зарубежных поездок. Роуз считал старшего мальчика на южном фризе восточным принцем, вероятно Аспургом, будущим царем Боспора. Он предположил, что царица Динамия приехала в Рим с Агриппой и что изображенная на Алтаре женщина, которая кладет руку на голову мальчика, – это именно Динамия. Роуз обнаружил слабость теории Джузеппе Моретти, который считал, что два мальчика, одетые как троянцы – это Гай и Люций Цезарь. Авторы согласны с Энн Каттнер, Гайусом Стерном, Джоном Поллини и Иларией Ромео, что мальчики – это варвары, а не римляне, но авторы не могут согласиться с идентификацией этих персон с Динамией и Аспургом (1) по



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просопографическим причинам, потому что присутствие Динамии на Алтаре Мира зависит от ее идентификации как матери Аспурга, а древние источники этого не подтверждают; (2) с практической точки зрения, поскольку Динамия должна была остаться в своем царстве, чтобы помочь Полемону укрепить свой новый трон (чтобы противостоять этой точке зрения необходимы будут настоящие доказательства, а не спекуляция); (3) по иконографическим причинам, поскольку женщина на Алтаре Мира не очень похожа на изображения Динамии; (4) потому что Динамия к 13 г. до н.э., как показывает ее портрет на двух золотых статерах, была зрелой женщиной средних лет, в то время как подросток, изображенный на Алтаре Мира, слишком молод, чтобы считать его Аспургом. В действительности женщина на Алтаре – это наименее известная дочь Агриппы. На ее голове нет диадемы, а есть лента которую надевали римские девушки в брачном возрасте. Ее рука лежит на голове парфянского принца, «гостя» Рима, принятого семьей Агриппы.

## I. THE *ARA PACIS AUGUSTAE*: NEW EVIDENCE FOR BOSPORAN DYNASTIC HISTORY?

### 1. Dynamis, the Most Prominent and Controversial Queen of the Bosporus

Queen Dynamis is the most illustrious example of a royal female from both the Bosporan kingdom and the Mithradatid dynasty. The former was a realm that began to develop from the city of Pantikapaion (modern Kerch, located close to the easternmost tip of the Crimea) in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. It controlled substantial portions of the European and Asian Kimmerian Bosporus (the modern Strait of Kerch) until the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD. The aforementioned dynasty gained fame as rulers of a small principality in northwest Asia Minor under the Achaimenids, before establishing itself as a kingdom in Paphlagonia and northern Kappadokia around Amaseia (Amasya) in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. After the conquest of Sinope (Sinop) starting in the early-2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, its orientation shifted towards the Black Sea coast and its kingdom became known as Pontus. The most famous dynast of this ruling house, Mithradates VI Eupator (123/16–63 BC), gradually extended his territory to include the former Bosporan kingdom in the north (ca. 110 BC) and Kolchis (west Georgia) in the East. He became most notorious as the man who defied the Roman Empire for about half a century. His appetite for expansion brought him in constant conflict with the superpower of the Mediterranean world, which resulted in a series of major ('Mithradatic') wars (89–84, 82–80, 73–63 BC).

Having lost his possessions in Asia Minor and Kolchis, Mithradates tried to renew the war once more from Pantikapaion in 63 BC, but his own son Pharnakes opposed him and forced him to commit suicide, after which he took over the Bosporus as Great King of Kings Pharnakes II (63–47 BC).<sup>1</sup> He was the father of our main subject, Queen Dynamis. After gaining recognition from the Romans and extending the boundaries of his northern dominion as far as Tanaïs on the mouth

1 On the Mithradatids of Pontus up to Pharnakes II, see Hoben 1969; Gajdukevič 1971; Sullivan 1990; Ballesteros Pastor 1996; Højte 2009; Roller 2020; see also Payen, chapter VII on Pharnakes I in this volume.



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of the homonymous river (now the Don), to fully encircle the Maiotis (Sea of Azov), he seized the opportunity that the Roman civil war offered. Caesar had defeated Pompey at Pharsalos (9 August 48) and was chasing him down as far as Egypt when Pharnakes invaded his ancestral homeland Pontos (48 BC). But despite Pharnakes' initial success, Caesar defeated him at Zela and expelled him from Asia Minor almost exactly a year later, on 2 August 47 BC.<sup>2</sup>

Shortly before the Battle of Zela, Asandros, one of Pharnakes' leading generals, who had been left in control of the Bosphorus, revolted and he established himself as ruler after killing Pharnakes in the same summer. Conducive to the stability of his rule was his marriage with princess Dynamis, who gave him at least the appearance of dynastic legitimacy. His position was corroborated when Mark Antony sold him recognition as a *rex amicus populi Romani* in 44 BC. Aged over 90 years, Asandros finally appointed his wife *basilissa* and co-regent, but not even this gesture held Dynamis back from joining the usurper Scribonius, who took control in 20 or 19 BC. Scribonius' bluff about Roman support was soon exposed and he was killed in due course (ca. 16 BC), while Dynamis stayed in power. The Romans, however, insisted on establishing a king they could trust and dispatched Polemon I, then the ruler of Pontos and Kolchis, to take control. Resistance was fierce, even after Polemon was victorious in a first battle (ca. 15 BC). Only when M. Vipsanius Agrippa, the associate emperor, was gathering a fleet in Sinope for a major naval campaign to the Bosphorus did Dynamis give in and accept Polemon into her realm as her king and third husband (14 BC).<sup>3</sup>

Her biography is by no means without difficulties thus far, but the timeline here proposed is quite firm.<sup>4</sup> Much more controversial are the remaining parts of her life. Clear evidence for her abruptly ends with the arrival of Polemon, who immediately became the sole minting authority. Likewise, our literary sources turn silent about her after the royal wedding. At least, Strabo mentions Polemon twice as campaigning on the Asian side of the Bosphorus, where he was killed by

- 2 Besides the previous note, see also chapters VIII (Ballesteros Pastor) and X–XII (Coşkun) in this volume for more on Pharnakes II and Roman imperial politics 63–47 BC.
- 3 The two most important literary sources, Lukian, *Makrobioi* 17 and Cass. Dio 54.24.4–6, are quoted below, in notes 10 and 18 respectively. Easiest access to the numismatic sources is by MacDonald 2005; cf. Frolova 1997. For a selection of royal inscriptions, see Ivantchik & Tokhtas'ev 2011; Coşkun 2016; for a comprehensive discussion, see Coşkun in preparation. See also next note.
- 4 Scholars have dated the accession of Asandros between 49 and 42 BC and his death to ca. 20/15 BC, but once ideological distortion is set aside and methodological flaws are overcome, the literary, numismatic and epigraphic evidence combined yields exactly the year dates suggested above, see Coşkun 2019a; also 2016; 2017a; 2017b; 2019b; 2020a; 2020b; in preparation, based on or developing further Heinen 1998; 2006; 2008a; 2008b; 2011; forthcoming a; forthcoming b; arguing with Rostovtzeff 1919; Macurdy 1937, 33–38; Golubtsova 1951; Hanslik & Schmitt 1963; Hoben 1969; Gajdukevič 1971; Sullivan 1980; 1990; Anokhin 1986; Saprykin 1990; 1996; 2002, 97–99; Saprykin 2005, 170f.; Nawotka 1991/2; Leschhorn 1993; Frolova 1997; Kozłóvskaia 2003; 2004; Braund 2004; MacDonald 2005; Ballesteros Pastor 2008a; Saprykin & Fedoseev 2009; Primo 2010; Yaylenko 2010; Ivantchik & Tokhtas'ev 2011; Roller 2018a; Zavoykina, Novichikhin & Konstantinov 2018, 682–686.



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