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EUPATOR'S UNMARRIED SISTERS: AN APPROACH TO THE DYNASTIC STRUGGLE IN PONTUS AFTER THE DEATH OF MITHRIDATES V EUERGETES

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When Roman legions invaded the Pontic territory in 72 BC, Mithridates sought to keep the women of the royal court safe. Some of these women were sent eastwards to Pharnacia hoping that they could be preserved from the war. The next year, the king was defeated at Cabira and forced to retreat to Iberia. A passage in Plutarch's *Life of Lucullus* recounts that at that desperate moment Eupator dispatched the eunuch Bacchides to ensure the death of these women in order to prevent them from falling in enemy hands. The scene was extremely dramatic: Queen Monime tried to hang herself with her own diadem, but she failed because the diadem broke. She then presented her throat to be cut by Bacchides. Both the concubine Berenice and her mother drank poison; the former, however, did not take enough of the drug, and the eunuch strangled her. Two of Mithridates' sisters, Roxane and Stateira, also took poison. Prior to dying, the first one cursed the king. The second woman, in contrast, expressed gratitude to her brother: far from neglecting them, he had provided them the opportunity to die in freedom and under no shame.¹

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¹ Plu. *Luc.* 18; App. *Mith.* 82; Memn. *FGrHist* 434 F1, 30.1; Aelian fr. 14 Hercher; Van Ooteghem 1959, 98; Van Hooff 1990, 61, 95; Keaveney 2005, 122; Tröster 2008, 39. The contrast between Roxane's curse and Stateira's gratitude has been regarded as 'literary inventions to dramatize the ethical problems posed by a dramatic situation' (Portanova 1988, 523 n. 857). Plutarch's passage has been attributed to Archias (Reinach 1890, 335 with n. 2). On Bacchides, see Olshausen 1974, 168; Guyot 1980, 98, 191. Other royal women took refuge in Cabeira, and Lucullus found

Plutarch informs the reader that the princesses were ‘about forty years old’ at that time. It has been presumed, however, that they should have been older, as Mithridates V had died at the latest in 120 BC.² The paucity of information about events in the Pontic court from the death of this king until Eupator’s accession to the throne, as well as the fact that this age probably comes from a rounded number, has led modern scholars to suspect that Plutarch’s source quite likely provided an erroneous report. Nonetheless, if this age were true, even approximately, important conclusions could be deduced. They can help us partially reconstruct the state of affairs within the palace of Sinope while Mithridates Eupator was an orphaned prince under the regency of his mother Laodice.

The exact date of Euergetes’ death is unknown. We only have several indirect testimonies that are very difficult to relate to each other. Regarding Eupator’s age at the time of his father’s death, the ancient accounts reveal that the prince could have been 11 or 12 years old.³ His date of birth is a matter of dispute: depending of the source, it may be placed between 135 and 133 BC.⁴ Other arguments are not very useful either. It is well attested that Greater Phrygia was removed from the Pontic rule by the Roman Republic after the death of Mithridates Euergetes, but the concrete moment for this decision does not appear in our sources. For a long time, the suggested date was 116 BC, because it was the year commonly proposed for a *senatus consultum* alluding to the status of Phrygia (*OGIS* 436), presumably issued in that year during the consulship of Licinius Geta.⁵ This measure, however, may have been decided some years earlier under Geta’s praetorship.⁶ We also know that Caius Gracchus delivered a speech against the so-called *Lex Aufeia* in which Manius

them alive (Plu. *Luc.* 18.1–2). The general’s attitude towards the royal Pontic and Armenian women could be related to *Imitatio Alexandri*: see Ballesteros-Pastor 1998, 81; cf. Carney 1996. On this kind of scene, see Van Hooff 1992. On the king’s retreat to Caucasus, see in particular Ioseph. *AI* 13.419; cf. *BI* 1.116; Traina 2012, 83.

² Reinach 1890, 50; Sherwin-White 1984, 43; Portanova 1988, 379, 391; Kallet-Marx 1995, 240.

³ Str. 10.4.10 (11 years old); Eutr. 6.12.3 (12 years old); Memnon’s statement (*FGrHist* 434 F1, 22.3) that Mithridates VI got the power when he was 13 is a confusion with 23, which was the king’s age when he began his effective rule (wrongly regarded as regnal years by Justin 38.8.1): Ballesteros-Pastor 2009, 224; 2013b, 82–84, 209. Eupator’s childhood as an orphaned prince may have contributed to presenting him as a hero appointed by divinity: cf. Müller 2009.

⁴ 135 BC: Eutr. 6.12.3; Oros. *Hist.* 6.5.7. 133/2 BC: App. *Mith.* 112. Both Cassius Dio (36.9.5) and Sallust (*Hist.* fr. 5.5M) suggest that the king was even older: cf. Ryan 2001, 105 n. 38; Ballesteros-Pastor 2013b, 76–95.

⁵ McGing 1980; Sherwin-White 1984, 96. Ryan 2001, 101–103, agrees with this date, but defends the proposal that Phrygia was removed from Pontic rule in 118 BC.

⁶ Drew-Bear 1972, proposed 119 BC. Ramsey 1999, 238–239, and Wiseman 2009, 50, suggested c. 122. Brennan 2000, vol. II, 470, pointed to a possible date in 120.

Aquillius, the consul who ended the war of Aristonicus, was accused of accepting bribes from both Nicomedes III and Mithridates V (Gell. *NA* 11.10.4; cf. App. *Mith.* 12, 57, *BC* 1.22; Liv. *Per.* 70). These kings were likely trying to obtain some Anatolian territories from this magistrate, who had organized the province of Asia. Mithridates actually got the annexation of Greater Phrygia thanks to this money.⁷ Gracchus' speech, frequently dated in 121 BC, may have been delivered some time earlier, coinciding with the period when the tribune was at the height of his influence. Thus, a date towards 123/2 can be suggested for Geta's praetorship, which provides a more coherent background for these senatorial decisions regarding Asia Minor.⁸ This hypothesis could be reinforced by relating Gracchus' discourse with the *Lex Acilia repetundarum*, plausibly issued on account of the *popularis* opposition to Aquillius' measures in Asia.⁹ Finally, Euergetes' death has been linked with the comet seen in 120 BC: according to Justin (37.2.2) a brilliant star appeared when Eupator began to rule.¹⁰ This may fit with Pliny and Appian, who described Eupator's reign as 56 or 57 years.¹¹ Without valorizing the reliability of these options, it is evident that none of the proposed dates for the end of Euergetes' lifetime correspond with the age reported by Plutarch for these princesses in 71 BC. The conclusion we can reach is clear enough: Roxane and Stateira actually were the daughters of queen Laodice, but their conception took place after Euergetes had deceased. Their father, therefore, was not the king.

The ancient sources are silent with regard to the circumstances surrounding the end of Mithridates V. Justin (37.1.6) states that Euergetes' death was sudden (*repentina*), which may suggest a murder. Indeed, Strabo describes an alarming scenario in Pontus that led his ancestor Dorilaus the Tactician to live in exile in Crete for some years.¹² The hypothesis that Laodice acted as an agent of the Roman interests is quite weak in the face of the lack of any evidence in this regard.¹³ We have no information to confirm that the Republic saw the Pontic king

⁷ Against this interpretation of the *Lex Aufeia*, see Magie 1950, vol. II, 1043f. n. 27. Very likely, these allusions to Phrygia were referred to some areas of Galatia bordering Bithynia and Pontus (cf. Iust. 37.4.6; Ballesteros-Pastor 2013b, 165–167).

⁸ Ramsey 1999, 238. Sherwin-White 1982, 20, and Kallet-Marx 1995, 110 n. 54, suggested a date in 124 BC; cf. *contra* Ryan 2001, 106. It has been assumed that this law was not specifically related with cession of territories, but in general with Aquillius' issues: Hill 1958, 113; Gruen 1984, 608 n. 147.

⁹ For this law, see Crawford 1996, vol. I, 65–112; on its relationship with Aquillius, see *ibid.*, 51; Gruen 1968, 89–90; Sherwin-White 1982, 20; cf. Rosillo López 2010, 107 and *passim*.

¹⁰ Imhoof-Blumer 1912, 187; Salomone Gaggero 1979, 137; McGing 1986, 42; De Callatay 1997, 239; Ramsey 1999.

¹¹ App. *Mith.* 112; Plin. *NH* 25.6; Salomone Gaggero 1979, 136.

¹² On Dorylaus, see Str. 10.4.10; Biffi 2010, 102–105. See below n. 20.

¹³ Reinach 1890, 47, 51 n. 1; Rostovtzeff and Ormerod 1932, 225ff; Hind 1994, 133.

as a threat that needed to be eliminated at once. Thus, everything points to an inner quarrel within the court at Sinope.

Numerous consequences resulting from this situation can be inferred. To begin with, this problematic background could explain the conspiracies against the life of young Mithridates, although Justin combines these plots (37.2.4–9) with the prince's education by the magi from the court. We can also understand the fact that Eupator seized power in his reign before his childhood ended (Sall. *Hist.* fr. 2.75M), perhaps in trying to prevent a *coup de main* from a group aiming to hinder the prince's accession to the throne. Some ancient authors describe Eupator's actions upon his ascension to power: his imprisonment of the queen, whom he condemned to death, and the murder of his brother. Likewise, there are allusions to the king's murder of one of his brothers.¹⁴ We know that upon Euergetes' death, Eupator had a younger brother called Mithridates Chrestus.¹⁵ It is not unlikely that this prince was supported by Laodice's faction at the court, but it is also feasible that the regent queen could have given birth to another son and that she aimed to promote the rights of the latter above Euergetes' legitimate heirs. By and large, Eupator felt forced to drastically intervene in order to consolidate his authority, thus eliminating people endangering his succession to the Pontic throne.

The fact that Mithridates VI left these sisters unmarried may confirm our hypothesis. The king did not want to involve the princesses in his dynastic policy, perhaps aiming to prevent them from using any possible influence derived from marriage to conspire against their brother.¹⁶ We have seen that, according to Plutarch, Roxane blamed Eupator when Bacchides gave her the poison. Leaving aside the dramatic situation at that moment, perhaps the princess felt resentment towards the king because he had forbidden her to marry.

It seems reasonable to suspect that Plutarch was mistaken, but there are some points that allow us to trust in the reliability of his narration. To decide between the two options about the princesses' ages means a difference of some ten years (that is, to be born before Euergetes' death or towards 112/111 BC). Thus, we are not facing a small shift in the numbers, but a remarkable variation. Besides, it is worth noting that several extant sources for Lucullus' war against Mithridates may have been derived from eyewitnesses to these facts. To the writings of both Antiochus of Ascalon and Archias, who accompanied the Roman commander, we may join the lost account of Pompeius Trogus, whose ancestor is presumably to be identified with the *praefectus equitum* M. Pom-

¹⁴ App. *Mith.* 112; Sall. *Hist.* fr. 2.75M, fr. 2.76M; Sen. *Contr.* 7.1.15; Memn. *FGrHist* 434 F1, 22.2.

¹⁵ Str. 10.4.10; Memn. *FGrHist* 434 F1 22.2; Durrbach 1921–1922, no. 113–114.

¹⁶ On Eupator's marriage policy, see Seibert 1967, 129ff.; Ballesteros-Pastor 1996, 321ff.

peius (or Pomponius), whom Plutarch, Appian, and Memnon mention as an outstanding lieutenant in this campaign. These three authors describe Lucullus' arrival to Pharnacia, which may point to a common source: Trogus.¹⁷

The names of these Pontic princesses deserve our attention, as they can help us identify the group that held power in the Pontic court. Roxane, the daughter of Oxyartes, had been Alexander's wife. Stateira was the eldest daughter of Darius III. She married the Macedonian king in the mass wedding at Susa, and was thereafter executed by order of Roxane.¹⁸ No royal woman had been named after Alexander's wives since the king's time. Accordingly, such an onomastic trend aimed to evoke the Iranian face of the Macedonian deed in Asia. To some extent these women represented the symbol of the *homonoia* and the assumption of the Persian heritage from Alexander's side that made the conqueror appear as an heir of the Achaemenid tradition.¹⁹ At the same time, these names represented a turning point when compared to other Hellenistic dynasties: Alexander was not to be seen from the Macedonian perspective but from an Iranian point of view.

The choosing of these names may suggest that the nobles who surrounded Queen Laodice could have belonged to the Iranian aristocracy of the Pontic kingdom. Evidence for this nobility is but sparse and disperse. An inscription from Amasya, dated in the reign of Pharnaces I, mentions a chief of garrison (*phourarchos*) called Meriones who was honored by his officer Pharnabazus. In this epigraph, Meriones is called *kyrios*, a term usually translated as 'lord' that may have an Iranian meaning.²⁰ The officer's Persian name is well attested in Eupator's time: Pharnabazus was Strabo's ancestor appointed as governor of Colchis.²¹ In addition, we may presume that some of the fortresses described by this author in the Pontic realm were not royal buildings, but instead towers built by the nobles in their domains, as was common in other regions in Achaemenid Asia Minor.²² We cannot, however, guess how decisive the influence of this aris-

¹⁷ See above n. 1. On this prefect, see Plu. *Luc.* 15.2; App. *Mith.* 79; Memn. *FGrHist* 434 F1, 30.2, and about his identification with Trogus' relative, see Goukowsky 2001, 208 n. 730; Ballesteros-Pastor 2013b, 1. On Trogus as a source for these authors with regard to Mithridates, see Ballesteros-Pastor 2011, 115f.; 2013a, 186; 2013b, 15–19, 40–46, 98 and *passim*. On Antiochus, see Plu. *Luc.* 28.7; on Archias, see Cic. *Arch.* 21. About the sources for this campaign see also Rizzo 1963; Pulci Doria Breglia 1973/74; Ballesteros-Pastor 1999.

¹⁸ On Roxane, see Carney 2000, 106f., 146–8; Heckel 2005, 241–242 s.v. Rhoxane; Müller 2012. On Stateira, see Carney 2000, 94–96; Heckel 2005, 255–6 s.v. Stateira [2].

¹⁹ See Bosworth 1980.

²⁰ Anderson, Cumont and Grégoire 1910, 116–117 no. 95; Olshausen 1978, 437; cf. Benveniste 1966, 20; Portanova 1988, 333; Ballesteros-Pastor 2014.

²¹ Str. 11.2.18. See Dueck 2000, 5–6; Cassia 2000. For other Iranian dignitaries in Eupator's empire, see Olshausen 1974; Portanova 1988.

²² On these fortresses in Pontus, see Ballesteros-Pastor 1996, 336–337; 2006, 386; cf. Olshausen 1978, 437.

tocracy was, or to what extent this privileged group was affected by the progress of Greek elements within the government of Pontus. Immediately after seizing power, the young Mithridates engaged a series of campaigns in Northern Euxinus.²³ As had been the case with Alexander after Philip's death, the Pontic king needed to acquire charisma among his subjects in order to achieve prestige and authority.²⁴ This charisma was not related to the origin of the subjects, but it simply represented an inseparable feature of kingship.²⁵

Hellenic names prevailed amongst the known dignitaries at the Pontic court, and this has led to the conclusion that Eupator's coming to the throne was supported by powerful Greek families interested into developing a wider economic relationship with other areas around the Black Sea and the Aegean.²⁶ Although the importance of these Greeks cannot be denied, we are probably facing a case analogous to the antagonism between Orophernes and Ariarathes V of Cappadocia: the dynastic quarrels within these royal houses were focused not on the degree to which the claimants to the throne were Hellenized, but instead were simply concentrated on a struggle for power. The support of Greek cities and individuals for one faction or another would be an added issue to these disputes, but not the factor that provoked their outbreak.²⁷ Eupator actually showed his Persian roots in other episodes of his reign, along with an openly philhellenic attitude.²⁸

The contacts between the Pontic dynasty and the Greek world went back to the satrapy of Dascylium, which was ruled by the ancestors of the Mithridatids. The epigraphic evidence has shown how these satraps joined both Greeks and Persians around the court at Dascylium, continuing the process of cultural integration.²⁹ Perhaps the most illustrative example of this contact could be the case of Memnon and Mentor of Rhodes: their sister married the satrap Artabazus II,

²³ Iust. 37.3.1–2: *Ad regni deinde administrationem cum accessisset, statim non de regendo sed de augendo regno cogitavit. Itaque Scythas perdomuit. 38.7.4: bella Pontica ingressum cum rudis ac tiro esset.* On these campaigns, see Olshausen 1978, 420–422; McGing 1986, 43–65; Heinen 1990; Boffo 1991; Olbrycht 1994; Ballesteros-Pastor 1996, 43ff.

²⁴ On Alexander's policy regarding Philip's memory, see Müller 2010; Gilley and Worthington 2010, 190, 206. On Alexander's consolidation in the Macedonian throne and his first campaigns, see in general Bosworth 1996, 33ff.

²⁵ Gehrke 1982.

²⁶ Portanova 1988, 560ff.; cf. Rostovtzeff 1967, vol. II, 908. Reinach, 1890, 47, thought that Queen Laodice was a Seleucid, and thus proposed that the Iranian nobles were opposed to the regency of a foreign queen. We know of a greater number of Greeks names than Iranian ones in the Pontic court: Olshausen 1974; Ballesteros-Pastor 1996, 432–3. Other inscriptions likewise tell of Greek dignitaries in Eupator's empire: Vinogradov and Vnukov 1997; Krapivina and Diatroptov 2005; Avram and Bounegrou 2008.

²⁷ Ballesteros-Pastor 2006, 383–385.

²⁸ Ballesteros-Pastor 1996, 402–405; 2012; 2013a, 188ff.

²⁹ Maffre 2007. About the satrapy, see Weiskopf 1996.

whose daughter Barsine would thereafter join to Alexander and give birth to a son.³⁰ Artabazus, who rebelled against Artaxerxes Ochus in 356, had to flee (together with his family) to the court of Macedonia, where Philip II gave them refuge as guests.³¹ Thus, recalling the great Alexander did not represent a negation of the Iranian identity of these Pontic nobles of the second century BC, but instead represented the aim to integrate the Macedonian figure within a conception of royalty linked to the Achaemenid traditions.

Although it is doubtful that Mithridates actually proclaimed to be a descendant of Alexander,³² the naming of these princesses may demonstrate how the Pontic dynasty had manifested an interest in assuming some facets of the Macedonian tradition, according to the kings' approach to the Greek world. One of Eupator's elder daughters was called Drypetine, like the Achaemenid princess who married Hephastion, Alexander's closest friend.³³ Regarding the male names, we know about Oxatres, one of Eupator's youngest sons, which may recall either Oxyathres, the brother of Darius III who became Alexander's friend, or Oxyartes, Roxane's father.³⁴ Eupator's choice of these names may again reflect a desire to connect the Mithridatid house with the Persian side of Alexander's imperial view.

This perspective recalling the *homonoia* would be spread in other Eastern dynasties, particularly beginning in the first century BC. One example is to be detected in some passages of Justin's account about Alexander in which the conqueror shows his 'Persian' side, e.g., his encomiastic speech to the Iranian *epigonoï* who had joined the Macedonian army. Indeed, Pompeius Trogus' *Historiae Philippicae* adapted a universal history initially conceived in the court of Tigranes the Great of Armenia.³⁵ The Pontic point of view, therefore, may have anticipated the later claim of the conqueror's heritage by the dynasties of Armenia, Cappadocia, Commagene, and even Parthia.³⁶

³⁰ On Barsine, see Carney 2000, 101–105, 149ff; Heckel 2005, 70 *s.v.* Barsine (daughter of Artabazus).

³¹ D.S. 16.52.3–4; Athen. 6.256c–e; Curt. 5.9.1; 6.5.2; Hammond, Griffith 1979, 309, 484 n. 5; Atkinson 1994, 141; Olbrycht 2010, 346ff.

³² Iust. 38.7.1. Cf. the remarks of Ballesteros-Pastor 2012, 379 n. 71; 2013b, 279–280.

³³ On this Persian princess, see Carney 2000, 110–111; Heckel 2005, 116, *s.v.* Drypetis. On Eupator's daughter, see Val. Max. 1.8. ext. 13; D.C. 37.7.5; Amm. 16.7.10; Portanova 1988, 253–254.

³⁴ App. *Mith.* 108, 117; Portanova 1988, 366; 512 n. 766; Ballesteros Pastor 2013b, 58. On the Persian prince and Roxane's father, see Schmitt 2002a; 2002b; 2002c.

³⁵ On this passage see Iust. 12.12.1–3; cf. Curt. 10.3.6–14; Yardley and Heckel 1997, 274–275; Yardley and Atkinson 2009, 134–139. On sources for Trogus and Tigranes II see Ballesteros-Pastor 2013b, 20–46 and *passim*.

³⁶ On Parthia, see above all Tac. *Ann.* 6.31.1; Wolski 1983, 142; Panitschek 1990, 459ff; Wiesehöfer 1996, 133ff. On Commagene, see Facella 2006, 291–4. On Cappadocia, see Ioseph. *AI*

The dangers faced by Eupator during his childhood undoubtedly formed part of the heroic portrait of this king, who appears depicted with the features of a protagonist in a folk tale.³⁷ Accordingly, historical and cultural reasons have been suggested to explain the details provided by Justin (37.2) about Mithridates' first adventures. Attempts to poison the prince may be interpreted as ordeals related with the wisdom of the magi.³⁸ In addition, Mithridates had to ride on a fierce horse, which could be related to another feature of an Iranian education and evokes the story of Alexander and Bucephalus.³⁹ The prince's flight to the mountains and remaining hidden for some time recalls a phase of the Iranian education compared by Arrian with Spartan *krypteia*.⁴⁰ Notwithstanding these explanations, the possible existence of dynastic plots within the Pontic court during Eupator's childhood may have been a real fact. The proposed interpretation of Plutarch's passage about the women at Pharnacia may provide a historical base for these stories about Mithridates' youth, which probably echoed well-informed sources concerning this king.

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17.476. Another of Eupator's daughters was called Cleopatra, like Alexander's sister, and she was married to Tigranes the Great of Armenia: Iust. 38.3.2; Plu. *Luc.* 22.5; App. *Mith.* 108; cf. Memn. *FGrHist* 434 F1 31.2; D.C. 36.50.1; Portanova 1988, 294–6.

³⁷ See in general García Moreno 1993; Ballesteros-Pastor 2013b, 128–135.

³⁸ Portanova 1988, 138 n. 52; cf. Godbey 1930. On the magi in Pontus, see Mastrocinque 2005, 178–179; Marastoni 2009; Ballesteros-Pastor 2013, 124.

³⁹ McGing 1986, 44; García Moreno 1993, 107.

⁴⁰ Arr. *An.* 5.4.5; Briant 1982, 449–450; 1996, 340; Ballesteros-Pastor 2005, 153–154.

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Abstract

Plutarch (*Lucullus* 18) reports about two sisters of Mithridates Eupator who were about forty years old in 71 BC. This age would suggest that these princesses were not the daughters of Mithridates V Euergetes, who had died ca. 122 BC. After the king's death, therefore, there was some struggle in the court of Sinope. The accounts about the dangers suffered by Eupator during his childhood may reflect aspects of the Iranian education, but, at the same time, these episodes probably echoed plots planned by the regent queen Laodice in order to hinder the prince's accession to the throne. The queen was probably supported by Iranian nobles of the kingdom. However, the quarrel in the royal palace was not due to an opposition between Iranians and Greeks: it was just a struggle for power.