

ANATOLIA BETWEEN EAST AND WEST
THE PARALLEL LIVES OF THE ATTALID AND
MITHRIDATID KINGDOMS IN THE HELLENISTIC AGE

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In 334 BC the youthful king Alexander III of Macedon – Alexander the Great – led an army across the Hellespont from Europe into Asia. The declared pretext of his invasion was to liberate the Greek cities from the rule of the Persian Kings. This was the beginning of the most famous military expedition in the ancient world, and Alexander fought the first battle of the campaign at the river Granicus, a short distance inland from today's town of Biga. From then until his death in 323 Alexander led his armies from the Aegean Sea to the river Indus, conquering the entire region from Egypt to Kirgizstan.

In the course of these wars Alexander's aims and objectives changed. As a Macedonian tribal king he himself did not come from the cultural and political tradition of the Greeks, although he and his people claimed to be part of the Greek nation. In particular, the Macedonians had not shared the political experiences of the Greek cities from the sixth to the fourth centuries BC. This had been shaped and moulded above all by one thing, their opposition to Persia. The Greeks conceived the Persians to be their barbarian enemies and opposites. They developed an ideology of democratic opposition, based on their city-states, to the great oriental monarchy of the Persians. Herodotus of Halicarnassus developed this conception of the relations of the Greeks to the rest of the world in his great historical work. This traced the rise of the Persian monarchy and described the wars between the Greek and the Persians. He and other Greek writers envisaged a conflict between the European West against the Asiatic East. Their viewpoint remains of fundamental importance for the way we understand the world today.

Alexander and his Macedonians had not shared this experience and took a different view of Persian culture. Indeed the forerunners of Alexander the Great had even assisted the Persians in their invasion of Greece in 480/79 BC.

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Moreover Alexander's own political aims were transformed as soon as he set foot on Asiatic soil. He was not content to set Greece free from Persian domination, but aimed to become a world conqueror, not merely by overthrowing, but by replacing the Persian king and achieving god-like status himself. In this respect he and his chief followers were to behave more like Persians than Greeks. He adopted the traditions and trappings of eastern monarchy; he revered and protected the tomb of the founder of the Iranian Achaemenid dynasty, Cyrus the Great, and in a sense became the last of the Achaemenid kings himself.

So it is not at all surprising that he also attempted to change the attitudes of the Macedonian ruling class that accompanied his expedition. The most famous of his actions was to try to unite the Macedonian tribal leaders to the feudal nobility of the Achaemenid empire, by arranging marriages between his leading warriors and the women of the leading Persian land-owning families. This was symbolically achieved by a great communal wedding ceremony held at Susa, carried out according to Persian customs. This was led by the marriage of Alexander himself to Barsine, the eldest daughter of the last Persian king Darius III. All his leading generals were given bride from the highest Persian aristocracy, but we are also told that over 10,000 other Macedonians married women from Asia. That figure is probably exaggerated, but not altogether surprising, when we think that these men had been campaigning in the East away from their homes for up to twelve years.

The long-term effect of Alexander's campaigns and policies was to create an entirely new political situation in the ancient Near East. On the one hand, Greek-speaking invaders had overthrown a great oriental monarchy. Greek language and Greek culture spread across the regions conquered by Alexander in the cultural process known to modern historians as hellenization. However, hellenization did not reach all parts of the East, and had very uneven effects. In western Anatolia, for instance, where Greek settlements had been founded as early as 1000 BC, the influence of hellenization was profound and Greek cities became the universal form of local political organisation. But Greek influence was much weaker in central and eastern Anatolia, and was very superficial indeed in the more distant regions of Syria, Mesopotamia, Babylonia and Iran. Here the older political structures and traditions remained strong, and Alexander had done nothing to destroy them.

These observations about the historical background are designed as a prelude to the subject that I want to look at in more detail. This is the way in

which Anatolia was ruled after the conquests of Alexander, but before it became part of the empire of the next great conquerors of the ancient world, the Romans. This period, from 323 to 31 BC, is known to modern historians as the Hellenistic age, for they see it as the period when much of the ancient world which had previously been beyond the reach of Greek cultural influence, became Greek, at least in a superficial way. It was also the period in which the Greek language spread to most of the region.

For about forty years after Alexander's death his Macedonian successors fought fierce wars with one another, as they tried to claim control over his huge possessions. According to modern perceptions, which represent the Western historical tradition, three dynasties became especially important: the Seleucid kings whose main power bases were in northern Syria around Antakya and in Babylonia, the Ptolemies, whose capital was Alexandria in Egypt, and the Antigonids, who controlled Macedonia and the European regions. However, although these three kingdoms receive most attention in historical text books, their real power lasted for a relatively short time – not more than one hundred years until the Romans became the major force in the region in the second century BC. Moreover, none of them managed to become the decisive authority in Asia Minor, which lay between these three power blocs. All three dynasties had ambitions to control Anatolia, but none succeeded in doing so and even their partial control was short-lived. During the third century BC the Ptolemies, relying on naval power, were in charge of much of southern Asia Minor, including Cilicia, Pamphylia, Lycia and parts of Caria. The influence of the Antigonids was weak after 300 BC, although they briefly controlled parts of Caria around 200 BC under their king Philip V. The Seleucids were a stronger force, especially under Seleucus I and Antiochus I (305-261) and again under their greatest ruler, Antiochus III (223-187). During these periods they not only dominated the cities of western Turkey, but also managed to secure the overland route from Ionia along the Maeander valley and through southern Phrygia to Lycaonia (Konya) and the Cilician Gates, which gave them access to Syria.

However, the intermediate position of Asia Minor favoured the emergence of local kingdoms, which were to become extremely important for the history and development of Anatolia. The two most powerful Anatolian dynasties were the Attalids of Pergamum and the Mithridatids of Pontus in north-east Turkey, whose first capital was at Amasia. Both these ruling dynasties had their origins in the mixed Macedonian-Persian empire that Alexander the Great had created. However, they developed in significantly different ways from one another and their histories represent the conflicting

eastern and western traditions, which have always characterised Turkey's history. The Attalids became the most westernising and hellenic of the hellenistic kingdoms and became champions of Greek culture. The Mithridatids of Pontus took the opposite path and emphasised their Iranian origins, adopting Persian forms of political and religious organisation. They thus illustrate the two sides of the political coinage, which had been minted by Alexander the Great.

The geographer Strabo, who himself was born in Amasia, records the origins of the Attalid dynasty (13.4.1). He records that Pergamum, which we know had been a fortified stronghold since the seventh century BC, was used by Lysimachus, one of Alexander's direct Macedonian descendants, and one of the most powerful of his successor kings, as his treasury. In about 302 BC he entrusted it to the charge of Philetairos of Titum, which as a small city of Paphlagonia, on the Black Sea coast. Philetairos was a name that was commonly used by the Macedonians, and he seems to have been the son of a Macedonian family which settled in northern Asia Minor during or after Alexander's campaigns. He married a local woman called Boa. Hostile sources say she was a prostitute, but that should not necessarily be believed. In any case he was the product of one of the mixed cultural marriages that Alexander had encouraged. According to the story in Strabo he became a eunuch because his nurse, caught up in a great crowd at a funeral, had crushed his testicles and made him infertile. This colourful story is probably also a fiction, but hellenistic and oriental rulers, like to Ottoman Sultans, commonly employed eunuchs in their administration, as they were reliable and trustworthy, but above all because they posed no dynastic threat. A eunuch could hold power, but could not pass it on to a son.

However, Philetairos was in control of a fortune of 9000 talents at Pergamum, and when Seleucus I invaded north-west Asia Minor in a campaign against Lysimachus, he changed sides and emerged as an important figure when Seleucus defeated Lysimachus at the battle of Curupedion near Manisa in 281 BC. Philetairos thus became a semi-independent ruler under the general Seleucid hegemony of Asia Minor.

Since he had no children of his own, Philetairos adopted the sons of his younger brothers, called Eumenes and Attalus. Eumenes became king of Pergamum in 263 BC and soon afterwards defeated his Seleucid overlord Antiochus I, thus declaring Pergamum to be an independent kingdom. He was

succeeded in 241 BC by his nephew Attalus I, whose long reign until 197 established the Attalid dynasty as a major power in western Asia Minor. I shall return to its history shortly, but before that I would like to trace the parallel early history of the Mithridatid dynasty.

According to the Greek historian Polybius, the Mithridatids claimed that their origins went back to the sixth century BC. At that time the Persian king Darius I had given a large territory beside the Black Sea to one of the seven leading Persian families of the period, which formed an inner circle of powerful aristocrats within the court of the great king. In 302 BC (exactly the year that Philetairos took charge of the treasury at Pergamum) one of the descendants of this family, Mithridates II, was put to death by his overlord, the Macedonian king Antigonos the 'one-eyed' (Monophthalmos). This brought an end to Mithridatid control of the region which had been given to them in north-west Turkey. Diodorus Siculus, another Greek historian, says that this covered Mysia and Mariandynia, and thus extended from the area around Pergamum to the Black Sea coast near Heraclea Pontica (Ereğli), including the region of Balıkesir.

Mithridates II was succeeded by his son Mithridates III, who is usually called Mithridates I Ctistes ('the founder') because he is seen as the true founder of the kingdom of the Mithridatids in Pontus. With the help of Lysimachus, rival of Antigonos the 'one-eyed', Mithridates I moved firstly to an important castle in Paphlagonia, west of Gangra (Çankırı), and then soon afterwards to the much more important stronghold of Amasia, on the Iris river (Yeşil Irmak). Here he built a palace and enormous fortifications, and Amasia became the centre of his new kingdom. We should also note that at exactly this time Lysimachus himself married a Persian noblewoman called Amastris, who was the granddaughter of Darius III, the last Persian king. Thus Lysimachus's political marriage also presents an example of the fusion of East and West, of Macedonian and Persian, which was at the heart of Alexander's vision for his empire.

About a generation later in 279 BC, Philetairos of Pergamum broke his final link with his Paphlagonian homeland, when he handed over the harbour city of Amastris (Amasra, named after Lysimachus's new wife), which had been controlled by his brother Eumenes, to Ariobarzanes I, the successor of Mithridates I Ctistes. So we can see the parallel births of the two most important hellenistic kingdoms in Anatolia, at Pergamum and at Amasia. By a paradox the rulers of Pergamum had started in the east in Paphlagonia, before moving to

their new western kingdom, while the kings of Pontus had originally been based in a western territory, which may have included Pergamum itself.

Before we follow the stories of the two kingdoms further, one other very important event should be noted. In 278 BC Celtic tribes from Europe, the Galatians, crossed into Asia simultaneously at the Hellespont and at the Bosphorus and soon settled in central Anatolia around Ankara. They created a powerful state, and introduced the Celtic language, Celtic tribal political organisation, and a strong Celtic cultural identity to Asia Minor. They were much feared warriors and campaigned regularly, both fighting to achieve their own political objectives and as mercenaries in the pay of other rulers. On the other hand they were regarded as dangerous barbarian enemies by the Greek cities of Asia Minor and by the hellenistic kings. For both these reasons they had an important part to play in shaping Anatolia's history in the hellenistic age.

Let us return now to the Attalid kingdom, which built up its power and reputation principally by a series of wars fought against the Galatians and the Seleucids. Attalus I was their main champion in campaigns against both these rivals between 241 and 223 BC. Although in reality the Seleucids were more formidable enemies, in his victory propaganda he especially emphasised the defeats which he had inflicted on the Galatians. He represented these northern European invaders as the barbarian enemies of the civilised world, as infidel destroyers of temples and sanctuaries, and as a fundamental threat to the civilised communities of Greece, the Aegean region and Asia Minor. In fact the Galatians had already been demonised by the Greeks as the new barbarians, when they attacked the sanctuary of Delphi in 279 BC. They thus replaced the former Persian enemies, who in the world after Alexander had lost their political power and were now not an opposing but an allied force, integrated into the new hellenistic world order.

Attalus I, although himself of mixed Macedonian-Paphlagonian origin, presented himself as the champion and saviour of Greek civilisation against the Galatian barbarian threat. His victory propaganda expressed this very clearly. The famous sculptures of dying and defeated Galatians, which are known to us from Roman copies, depict them as noble savages, dying heroic deaths but conquered by the forces of civilisation who were protected by the Greek goddess of war and culture, Athena. Writers and artists represented Attalus's successful battles as equivalent to the victories of the Greeks over the Persians in

480 BC, and even, on a mythological level, to the triumph of the Olympian Greek gods, led by Zeus, over the giants, who stood for the powers of chaos and darkness. This was the theme chosen to decorate the great altar, which was built on the acropolis of Pergamum between 189 and 165 BC by Attalus's successor, Eumenes II.

The rise of Pergamum to become the leading power of western Anatolia was relatively short-lived. In 189 BC Roman legions came to Asia Minor for the first time in their war against Antiochus III, the greatest Seleucid king. He was defeated at the Battle of Magnesia, and the Romans imposed a new settlement on Asia at the Treaty of Apamea in 188 BC, which forbade the Seleucids from operating north of the Taurus mountains. In the short term the Attalids were the chief beneficiaries of this victory, since they were encouraged to extend their power across the whole of Asia, extending to the south coast at Antalya, ancient Attaleia. However, all this was only permitted with Roman approval. When the last Attalid king, Attalus III, died in 133 BC he bequeathed his kingdom in his will to the Roman people, in order to prevent it being destroyed by the squabbles of rival claimants. As a result western Anatolia became the first part of Anatolia that was directly ruled by the Romans, the province of Asia.

The history of the Mithridatids in the East took a different course. Mithridates I Ctistes was the first member of a royal dynasty which ended with the defeat and death of the greatest and most famous Pontic king, Mithridates VI Eupator, in 63 BC.

We have very little reliable information about the political history of this kingdom before the second century BC. We know that it was large and economically important, since it covered all of north-east Anatolia from Ereğli to Trabzon. At the heart of the kingdom were the fertile river valleys of the Iris and the Lycus (the Yeşil and Kelkit Irmaklar). These were dominated by a group of major settlements: Amasia, the royal capital, and a group of temple-states, ruled by priests, at Zela (Zile), Cabira (Niksar), and Comana Pontica (near Tokat). The populations of these states were not free landholders but sacred slaves, controlled by the priestly rulers, who occupied the second rank in the political hierarchy below the kings. The essential point to notice about these temple states is that they were the centres of Persian cults. Strabo describes the rituals at Cabira which he had witnessed himself. They were carried out by

Persian magi, dressed in Iranian costume, who chanted ritual hymns in their barbarian language and conducted sacrifices in the Persian fashion.

The kings of Pontus paid great attention to these sanctuaries. They gave money for the construction of new buildings and strengthened the authority of the priests. From the second century BC the kings also swore their inaugural oath of office at the sanctuary of Men Pharnakou at Cabira.

After the very patchy evidence which survives about the earlier kings, we have much more detailed information concerning the reign of Mithridates VI, who ruled from 120 to 63 BC. During this period he expanded his power far beyond the boundaries of his ancestral dominions. His first aim, which was successfully achieved by 110 BC, was to extend his kingdom across the entire Black Sea region, including the kingdom of the Crimean Bosphorus in the north and the Greek and native communities along the western Black Sea coast. In a second phase of expansion he set his sights on western Anatolia, which was now under Roman control. In 89 BC he launched a devastating attack on the province of Asia and his troops occupied most of its major cities. Many of their inhabitants welcomed him as a liberator from the oppression of Roman rule. In an episode which can be compared with the 11 September attack on the World Trade Centre in New York, Mithridates's supporters allegedly massacred 80,000 Roman or Italian businessmen, who had settled in the cities of Asia. This was a severe shock to Rome, and they sent an army under the command of Lucius Cornelius Sulla to recover control first of mainland Greece (which had been occupied by a Mithridatid army) and then of Asia Minor.

Over the following twenty years Mithridates was unable to retain control of western Anatolia and his power was gradually reduced in a series of campaigns. The scales finally shifted in the Roman direction when Pompeius Magnus (Pompey the Great) was authorised in 66 BC to lead a large army against Pontus and then against the rest of Mithridates's possessions as far as the Caucasus mountains. The king fled after a series of defeats and finally committed suicide in 63 BC, assisted by one of his Galatian bodyguards. As a direct consequence his kingdom was made part of the Roman empire and became the new province of Pontus.

The essential point which I want to emphasise about the Mithridatid dynasty, in particular during the great age of Mithridates VI, was that it advertised its connections to Persian culture. Mithridates's ambition was to

restore an oriental monarchy to match that of the Achaemenids. This was exactly the opposite of the position taken by the Attalids. Mithridates celebrated a triumph over the Roman general Licinius Murena by conducting sacrifices to the Persian god of the sky, Ahura-Mazda, on a mountain top which was crowned with an enormous fire altar. The manner of his victory sacrifice was modelled precisely on those conducted by Achaemenid kings in the sixth century BC at Pasargadae, their capital. Mithridates gave his own sons the names of the great Persian kings – Xerxes, Cyrus and Darius. In the imagery of his coins he used symbols of Persian religion and Persian monarchy. He and his predecessors promoted Persian religious rituals and built Persian sanctuaries.

Both ancient Asia Minor and modern Turkey have histories that draw on the cultures and civilisations of East and West. In today's world the country reflects the tension between the influence of western Europe and of Islam. This is nothing new. Such tensions have always characterised Anatolia's historical experience. In Classical antiquity Asia Minor was ruled from Persia between the sixth and fourth centuries BC, and by Rome from the second century BC until late antiquity. The history of the Attalids and the Mithridatids during the Hellenistic age, when the region was not dominated by external rulers, illustrates the same tensions from a different perspective. The choice between East and West still had to be made. The Attalids identified themselves with Hellenic European civilisation, based on co-operative rule with Greek city states such as Athens. The Mithridatids turned to Persia and developed a form of oriental monarchy derived from the Achaemenid tradition, and their partners were not Greek cities but eastern temple-states. They are prime examples of the two main cultural threads that have combined to make up Turkey's complex and fascinating civilisation.