

Phaselis in the Mithradatic–Pirate Nexus

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Abstract: This paper reassesses the role of Phaselis in the First Mithradatic War through a newly discovered inscription honouring King Mithradates VI Eupator. Found in what is called today the “South Harbour Trade Centre” and dated to 89-85 BC, the text offers the first epigraphic evidence of Mithradatic presence in the city, confirming its integration into Pontic–pirate alliances active along the eastern Lycian and western Pamphylian coasts. Drawing on literary and epigraphic sources, the study situates Phaselis within the contested maritime frontier where local powers, pirates, and Pontic forces resisted Roman authority. Although the city’s strategic harbours facilitated this co-operation for a while, it was besieged and punished by the Roman counterattack under Servilius Vatia (78-74 BC) and lost its territory for a while.

Type: Research Article

Received: 08.09.2025

Accepted: 01.10.2025

DOI: 10.37095/gephyra.1780059

Language: English

Keywords: Phaselis; Mithradates VI Eupator; Pamphylia; Lycia; piracy; Rome.

Gephyra 30 (2025), 135-142

One of the most impressive yet brief periods in the annals of Anatolian history is the first quarter of the first century BC. During this era, Mithradates VI Eupator, the king of Pontus, emerged as a formidable figure, ushering in a new era of hope to Anatolia amidst the prevailing control of Asia by Rome. Throughout this period, he brought almost all Asia Minor under his patronage. He was not merely a king; he self-fashioned as the liberator of the people under Roman dominion, the avenger of the East. From the Black Sea to Ionia, his name reverberated as a symbol of defiance. The population of urban areas greeted him as a liberator, extolling him as a saviour who had liberated them from the oppressive and extortionate practices of the Roman authorities. His military forces, comprising a diverse array of Anatolian tribes, Greek hoplites, and Scythian horsemen, advanced across Asia Minor and was seen as a liberating force.¹

However, Mithradates was aware that Rome’s strength did not solely stem from its military might and diplomatic prowess. The Roman Republic exercised dominion over the seas, and its affluence was circulated through the conduits of maritime trade. In order to challenge Rome’s dominion, he formed an alliance with the most unpredictable force operating in the eastern Mediterranean at the time – the pirates operating in Cilicia and eastern Lycia. Mithradates presented them with a dual offer of gold and a cause – an opportunity to retaliate against Rome’s insatiable appetite. Consequently, the pirates evolved from dispersed corsairs into a clandestine fleet that challenged Roman authority. It is evident that the forces in question engaged in the harassment of Roman supply lines, the disruption of mercantile networks, and the provision of sanctuary to Pontic

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The excavation and research activities at the ancient city of Phaselis [Project Number CK010712(2025)] were carried out on behalf of Selçuk University by the excavation director, Prof. Dr. Erdoğan Aslan, under the authorisation of Presidential Decree No. 8883 dated 29.08.2024 and excavation permit No. 6184746 dated 06.01.2025 issued by the General Directorate of Cultural Heritage and Museums, Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the Republic of Türkiye. I wish to express my profound gratitude to Prof. Dr. Erdoğan Aslan for kindly granting permission, and Prof. Dr. Fatih Onur for his encouragement to pursue the study of this inscription. I am also deeply thankful to Prof. Dr. Denis Rousset for his invaluable comments and insightful suggestions. Furthermore, I would like to extend my sincere thanks to the anonymous reviewers of this article for their careful reading and constructive feedback. Finally, I thank T. M. P. Duggan for polishing the English of this article.

¹ For a detailed account on how Mithradates presented himself as “Conquerer” and “Saviour” see Arslan 2007, 114-159 and for a short description and more references see Avcu 2024, 57-58.

forces along the southern shores of Anatolia². The formation of this alliance was not a response in desperation, but rather a manifestation of a shared sense of opposition. The cooperation of Mithradates and the pirates was driven by their shared antagonism towards Roman imperialism. The Lycian League had already formed an alliance with Rome in 164 BC and remained loyal to her in all circumstances throughout the remainder of the Roman Republic³. Nevertheless, the coastline extending from the promontory of Hierakra (mod. Gelidonya) to Attaleia evolved into a dynamic frontier, where the Roman advance, the Pontic ambition, and the autonomous pirate activities converged and intertwined. Phaselis was located in the midst of a complex geopolitical situation, providing refuge and assistance to pirates, and consequently to Mithradates, who, in a remarkable turn of events, was concurrently engaged in laying siege to the ancestral homeland of Phaselis, namely the island of Rhodes, which had been a staunch ally of Rome since the early 2nd century BC.

A new fragmentary inscription from Phaselis comes from within this turbulent context as evidence casting light upon the city's involvement in these campaigns. It was recovered in 2025 from soil infill in trench 3 of the "South Harbour Trade Centre" at a level of +2.50 m. The marble block is fragmentary, with broken and chipped edges on all sides, leaving no indication as to whether it originally bore a statue. Three lines of the inscription are preserved, and traces of guide lines used for alignment remain visible on the inscribed surface.

Inv. No.: PHA25.GLTM.A2.Y-1; **H:** 23 cm; **W:** 31 cm; **D:** 20 cm; **Lh:** 2,4 cm; **Date:** 89-85 BC.



Fig. 1) Top-right view



Fig. 2) Top-left view

[βασιλέα Μιθρα]δάτην Εὐπά[τορα Διόνυσον]
 ----- Μενάνδρου -----
 ----- AMEN -----

[.... (honoured) King Mithra]dates Eupa[tor Di-
 noysos] of Menandros ...



Fig. 3) Front view

² See in detail Arslan 2003a; 2003b; also see Maróti 1970, 485, 488-490.

³ App. *Mithr.* 20-21; Marek 1995; Arslan 2002, 119-128; Avcu 2024, 69, also n. 61; Rousset 2024.

The letters are carefully carved with fine apices and are typical of first century BC in transition from the Hellenistic to the Roman period, like the Γ with its short right stroke.

The accusative form of Mithradates' name in the first line of the inscription highlights the honourific nature of the text. The occurrence of his name in Phaselis provides the first epigraphic evidence of Pontic influence over the city and in the region east of Lycia and on the western shores of the Pamphylian Gulf. This is the second inscription containing his name from the southern Anatolian coast, the first being the inscription from Hippou Kome (mod. Çukurasar), which was to the west of the then Lycian border, that became integrated into Lycian territory by the early imperial period at the latest.⁴

The inscription preserves the genitive form of the name Menandros (Μενάνδρου) in its second line. L. 2 may have contained the name of the dedicator of the statue in the nominative case, with Μενάνδρου functioning as the patronymic, although this is not certain. If so, the dedicator may have been a civic magistrate, benefactor, or prominent citizen involved in these events. A Menandros of Laodicea, a cavalry officer of Mithradates known from Memnon and Appian⁵, could be considered a candidate; however, the semantic and syntactic integration of the genitive does not yield a certain interpretation.

l.3. AMEN: This is most likely part of an aorist participle qualifying either the dedicator or the dedicatee, e.g. -σάμεν-.

Historical background of the events concerning piracy and Mithradates along the western shore of the Pamphylian Gulf

That Phaselis, which P. Servilius captured, had not previously been a city of the Cilicians and pirates; Lycians, a Greek people, were inhabiting it. Because it was situated in such a location and projected so far into the sea that pirates sailing out from Cilicia would often of necessity put in there, and when returning from these regions would likewise be driven back to it, the pirates brought that town over to themselves, first through commerce and later also through alliance.

Cic. Verr. 2.4.21 (translated by the author)

These sentences by Cicero about Phaselis not only reflect the city's unfortunate circumstances, but also the region's dense piracy-related traffic. During the late Hellenistic period, the border between eastern Lycia and western Pamphylia was a dynamic and contested area where local autonomy, earlier Rhodian influence, Roman intervention, and Pontic ambitions collided. Following the testamentary bequest of Attalos III in 133 BC, the province of Asia became a theatre of Roman exploitation through the tax-farming system performed by the *publicani*, breeding resentment among Anatolian communities. Another decisive factor in the rise of piracy was the collapse of maritime control after the decline of Rhodes and Rome's failure to assume effective policing of

⁴ For the inscription from Hippou Kome and regional-provincial affiliation of the site see Avcu 2024; Onur 2022, 502-503; Yıldız – Onur 2022, 349-356; Onur 2024, 78-82.

⁵ During the First Mithradatic War (89-85 BC), Menandros accompanied the king's son (also named Mithradates) along with the generals Taxiles and Diophantus in the campaign against the Roman commander C. Flavius Fimbria (Memnon: *FGrH* 434 F 1,24,4). In the Third Mithradatic War (71 BC), Menandros was defeated at Cabira in Pontus by Sornatius, a legate of Lucius Licinius Lucullus (Plut. *Lucullus* 17.1). He was later taken prisoner and paraded in the triumph of Pompey on 29 September 61 BC (App. *Mith.* 573).

the Eastern Mediterranean, leaving sea routes and coastal settlements exposed to pirate depredations. This atmosphere of discontent was fertile ground for the proliferation of piracy along the southern coast, where disenfranchised populations and seafaring groups found common cause in opposing Roman dominion. In response, Rome launched military campaigns against the pirates, notably the expedition of Marcus Antonius the orator in 102-101 BC. Antonius succeeded in defeating pirate forces both at sea and on land, subsequently organizing Cilicia as a Roman province,⁶ upto this time Phaselis most probably remained in Asia according to the Customs Law of the province.⁷ An inscription from Athens, recording nine honourings, shows that the Lycian League, Myra, and Phaselis were among those who honoured an Athenian nauarch, indicating that Phaselis acted in concert with Lycia; this nauarch probably served with the allied fleet engaged against the pirates at that time, suggesting that Phaselis may have been, at least initially, aligned against the pirates.⁸ Shortly thereafter, around 100 or 99 BC, the *lex de provinciis praetoriis* was enacted to formalize Rome's efforts against piracy.⁹ However, not before long, the outbreak of internal conflicts in Rome, including the civil strife between the factions of Sulla and Marius and the Social War in Italy (91-88 BC), diverted Rome's attention from Anatolia. This period, when Rome was distracted, coincided with the meteoric rise of Mithradates VI Eupator, King of Pontus, who launched the First Mithradatic War in 89 BC.

Literary sources relate that during his first war with Rome, Mithradates, while conquering Asia, unleashed the pirates who, starting in small boats, expanded into fleets of biremes and triremes led by "archpirates" like generals, and who, even after his defeat, continued large-scale, organised piracy driven by dispossession.¹⁰ Mithradates, in other words, capitalized on the disarray, forging alliances with the pirate groups and leveraged their naval power to disrupt Roman trade routes and communications across Asia Minor and in the eastern Mediterranean. The pirates, emboldened by Mithradates' support, intensified their operations, blockading Roman supply lines and raiding coastal cities and islands.¹¹ Regions like Crete, Lycia, Pamphylia, and Cilicia became major hubs of pirate activity, significantly undermining Rome's maritime dominance (see literary sources given in n. 18 below). According to Strabo, the pirate leader Zeniketes controlled several important settlements on the Lycian coast, including Olympos/Korykos, and Phaselis.¹² He apparently exploited the Rome's weakness during this period to seize power, declaring himself king in Olympos. These were the times when Aichmon of Xanthos, admiral of the Lycian fleet, fought

⁶ See Sherwin-White 1976, 5-8; Ferrary 1977, 657; De Souza 1999, 102-108.

⁷ See most recent Mitchell 2008, 188-189, 199.

⁸ *IG II²* 3218; Habicht 2006, 314-315; Robert 1969, 1382; however, on the obscurity of the role of Romans in this see Kallet-Marx 1995, 305-306; for further and most recent notes see Rousset 2024, 129 with n. 65.

⁹ For the full text and commentary of this *lex*, see Crawford et al. 1996; also see De Souza 1999, 108-115.

¹⁰ App. *Mith.* 92-93 and 119; Plut. *Pompeius* 24; Dio 36.20-21.

¹¹ For a detailed account on relations between Mithradates and pirates see De Souza 1999, 116-121; Arslan 2003a; 2003b.

¹² Strab. 14.3.8 and 5.7. When interpreting Strabon's description of Zeniketes' stronghold, Ormerod 1924, 217 suggested that his main base was on Mount Tahtalı (Solyma), from which all of Lycia, Pamphylia, Pisidia and Milyas could be surveyed. Nollé 1996, 24, n. 36 considered this a plausible theory. However, it is more likely that Mount Olympos was Mount Musa, located between Olympos and Adrasan (Adak 2004, 32-34). See also Özer 2007, 81-104; Öztürk – Öncü 2020, 259-275.

the Pontic admirals and pirates off the promontory of Chelidonia (mod. Gelidonya Burnu).¹³ Nearby, in Korma, a fragmentary Sullan *senatus consultum*¹⁴ (c. 80 BC) was found, which is undoubtedly related to the First Mithradatic War. Another inscription, also from Korma and perhaps dating to the late 80s or 78–76 BC, records that a certain Opramoas saved the city from war and danger, thereby benefiting the League.¹⁵ All of this suggests that the Lycian League resisted Mithradatic and pirate incursions, possibly with support from allies in the interior. Obviously, the border between the Roman allies and the Mithradatic/pirate forces was to the west of Chelidonia at that time. The location of the inland border is unclear, but the eastern and northern territories beyond Korma, which were mostly Solymian lands, probably supported Mithradates and the pirates during the course of the First Mithradatic War. Phaselis, strategically located on the borderlands of Lycia and Pamphylia, found itself inevitably drawn into this pirate network probably from the beginning of the century. Its accessible and well-equipped harbours¹⁶ and proximity to the pirate strongholds facilitated close interactions with the Cilician corsairs, and it eventually became one of the hubs of the Mithradatic forces and pirates.

Despite Sulla's interventions, piracy persisted, prompting Rome to send Cn. Cornelius Dolabella in 80 BC to suppress this threat. Dolabella and his legate, C. Verres, instead exploited the situation, plundering cities and sanctuaries in Lycia, Pamphylia, and Pisidia under the guise of anti-piracy operations.¹⁷ Far from reducing piracy, their actions deepened local resentment and pushed communities towards alliances with the pirates. In 79 BC, the Senate appointed Publius Servilius Vatia as proconsul of Cilicia to restore Roman control over Lycia, Pamphylia, Pisidia, and Lycaonia, and to eradicate piracy from the eastern Mediterranean. Between 78 and 74 BC, Vatia waged a harsh campaign against the pirate strongholds along the Pamphylian and Lycian coasts, capturing Attaleia, Olympus/Korykos—where the stronghold of the Zeniketes also fell—and, most notably, Phaselis. These cities were besieged, captured, punished, and stripped of their territories.¹⁸

Amidst this turbulence, Termessos may perhaps have played a role in securing the coast under Rome following Vatia's campaigns.¹⁹ The *Lex Antonia de Termessibus* (72 or 68 BC) confirms the city's autonomy in 91 BC, which was likely lost after the First Mithradatic War—possibly due to assisting Pontic forces advancing toward Pamphylia.²⁰ The law restored Termessos' rights over

¹³ TAM II 264–266; Marek 1995, 17–18 argues that Aichmon's battles took place not in the 70s BC against pirates alone, but in the early 80s BC against Mithradatic naval forces supported by pirates; see also Baker – Thériault 2005, 329–366.

¹⁴ TAM II 899; Sherk 1969, 112–113 no. 19.

¹⁵ TAM II 900.

¹⁶ Throughout its historical development, the city has maintained its position as a port city in the eastern Mediterranean, see Tüner Önen 2012, 205–212.

¹⁷ Cic. *Verr.* 1.1.4; 2.1.43; 2.1.53–54; 2.1.95–96; 2.3.6; Iuv. 8.98–108. It is clear from the literary evidence that Olympus, Phaselis and Attaleia were the main bases for piracy, not the whole Lycia or Pamphylia, see fn.18 below. Also cf. Jones 1971, 403 fn. 13; Behrwald 2000, 109 fn. 366.

¹⁸ Cic., *leg. agr.* 1.5 and 2.50; Strab. 14.3.8 and 14.5.7; Sall., *hist.* 127–137; Oros. 5.23–22; Flor., *epit.* 1.41.6; Eutr. 6.3; For a detailed chronology of Vatia's campaigns see Maróti 1989.

¹⁹ A detailed account on this can be found in Onur 2024, 97–100

²⁰ See Mitchell 1994, 102; Ferrary 1985, 444; 1996, 332; Onur 2024, 97. Some argue that Termessos sided with Rome against Mithradates, see for example Bean 1976, 896; Arslan 2002, 128; 2007, 184, 254–255 and 537.

the lands it had held in 91 and 72 BC²¹ and permitted the return of citizens and slaves who had been taken during the conflict. During Dolabella's governorship (80-78 BC) Termessos may have suffered Roman abuses²², but under Servilius Vatia (78-74 BC) it likely realigned itself with Rome. The law also grants Termessos maritime customs rights and islands—dismissed by some as formulaic²³, but defended by Vitale, who links them to a third-century AD coin featuring an *aphlaston*, perhaps commemorating a naval activity, either contemporary or more probably earlier.²⁴ This suggests that Rome may have entrusted the nearby coasts and islands to Termessos.²⁵ The exact islands are unknown, but the closest is Sıçan/Reşad Adası. If more islands were included, they might extend towards Üç Adalar (Kypriai), though these would have been in the waters of Phaselis or Olympos — a possibility only if Termessos held authority briefly during Servilius Vatia's anti-piracy campaigns.²⁶ By 46 BC, however, Phaselis had become a member of the Lycian League,²⁷ and Termessos must already have lost any holdings it may briefly have possessed in the vicinity of Phaselis.

The newly discovered inscription from Phaselis, honouring Mithradates VI Eupator, is a significant addition to our understanding of the city's history, providing rare epigraphic evidence from these turbulent years. Until now, Phaselis' involvement in the Mithradatic–pirate alliance had largely been inferred from literary sources. This fragment is the first local document to provide direct evidence of Mithradatic influence in Phaselis, firmly situating the city within the network of Pontic and pirate collaboration along the Pamphylian Gulf. The honorific context of the inscription shows that Phaselis did not merely harbour pirates out of necessity; they also acknowledged for a time the Pontic king's authority. This fragment illuminates not only the local political alignments of Phaselis but also underscores the city's place within the shifting balance of power in the eastern Mediterranean, from its collaboration with Rome in M. Antonius' campaigns of 101-100 BC, to its collaboration with Mithradates and the pirates during the First Mithradatic War and the bitter consequences subsequently imposed by Rome.

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²¹ Onur 2024, 97-101 suggests that Oktapolis, Milyas, and Mnarike in the *Stadiasmos of Patara* may have been fiscal districts formed during or after Sulla's reorganisation of Asia in 84 BC (Cassiod., *Chron.* 483-4), and further proposes that Mnarike was possibly located south of Termessos in territory confiscated by Rome after the First Mithradatic War (*Lex Antonia de Termessibus* Col. I, ll. 20-2; Ferrary 1985, 444; 1996, 332).

²² Ferrary 1985, 446; Onur 2024, 98.

²³ For example, see Magie 1941, 185; 1950, 1177; Bean 1968, 124; Ferrary 1985, 454.

²⁴ Vitale 2011, 142-144, the coin appeared at Gorny & Mosch Giessener Münzhandlung, Auktion 126, 14.10.2003, Nr. 2024. A second specimen emerged at N&N London EA 17, 28 May 2023, lot 273.

²⁵ Vitale 2011, 139-145; Onur 2023, 36-37.

²⁶ For a discussion on these islands see Onur 2023, 36-37.

²⁷ See Mitchell 2005, Mitchell 2005, 169 ll. 54, 227-228. For a possible earlier membership in the Lycian League, see Troxell 1982, 68, 98; Brandt 2013.

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Mithradates–Korsan İttifakı Bağlamında Phaselis

Özet

Makale, Phaselis'in Birinci Mithradates Savaşı'ndaki rolünü, Kral IV. Mithradates Eupator'u onurlandıran ve yeni bulunan bir yazıt parçası üzerinden yeniden değerlendirmektedir. Güney Liman Ticaret Merkezi'nde bulunan ve MÖ 89-85 yıllarına tarihlenen metin, kentteki Mithradates yanlılığına dair ilk epigrafik kanıtı sunmakta ve kentin doğu Likya ve batı Pamfilya kıyılarında faaliyet gösteren Pontus-korsan ittifakına entegrasyonunu doğrulamaktadır. Edebi ve epigrafik kaynaklara dayanan bu çalışma, Phaselis'i yerel güçlerin, korsanların ve Pontus güçlerinin Roma otoritesine direndiği çekişmeli deniz bölgesinin odağında konumlandırmaktadır. Kentin stratejik limanları, bu iş birliğini belli bir süre kolaylaştırmış olmakla birlikte, Roma'nın Servilius Vatia komutasındaki karşı saldırısı (MÖ 78-74) ile kuşatılmış, cezalandırılmış ve topraklarını bir süreliğine kaybetmiştir.

Parça halindeki yazıtın yaklaşık çevirisi şöyledir: [.... Kral Mithra]dates Eupa[tor Dionoysos]'u Menandros'un ... (onurlandırdı).

Anahtar Sözcükler: Phaselis; IV. Mithradates Eupator; Pamfilya; Likya; korsanlık; Roma.