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The Bosphorus Strait and Byzantion: Changes after Conversion of Thrace into a Roman Province



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Abstract

Not much is known about the condition of the Bosphorus and Byzantion - the most significant urban centre in the South-Eastern Thrace after the annexation of the last client Thracian kingdom in Bizya and the conversion of Thrace into a Roman province in 45/46 AD. The literary evidence about the period until the end of the 1st century are too scarce and laconic and there was only one reason for that, i.e. the lack of any important political events, both in terms of international events, such as wars, military campaigns by land or by sea, ethnical migrations, and local ones, such as civil turmoils, battles with neighbours, etc. When facing this problem, we may refer for help to sources of other nature- archaeological, epigraphical, numismatic, as far as there are any available. The purpose of this work is to explore the data provided by such sources.

Keywords

Roman historiography · political changes · province · borders · Byzantion



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After 46 AD the territory of the *basileon* with centre Bizye/a was constituted into the Roman province of Thracia ruled by a procurator. These are the facts we know.

The literary tradition, however, provides contradictory details about the fate of Byzantion and its territory in the south-easternmost corner of the European Thrace and especially along the Straits. This “discrepancy” is understandable to some extent with a view to the lack of any important political perturbations in the region. Nevertheless, some remarks about the period from the middle to the end of the 1st century AD could be made.

On the eve of liquidation of the Thracian state, Byzantion was still an important factor in Southeastern Thrace. Although the city was losing its political authority along the Straits, yet its very presence determined its unignorable importance¹.

What was the influence of the changes during the Principate and how do they refer to the city and especially to its territory? Here we should immediately make the reservation that we do not know of any territorial possessions of Byzantion in Europe, and therefore - where its borders with the Bizye kingdom were. For sure Byzantion possessed the coastal segment extending at least to the present-day Karaburun Cape as well as the Delkos Lake (Derkos, Duru Su)². In its hinterland, however, we face a significant issue: How far did its possessions stretch to the southernmost parts of the massif of Strandja mountain or even more southwards (basing on the mentioning of the region Astica)? It is its mentioning in the literary sources that could possibly answer the question about the territories controlled by Byzantion. According to the *Periegesis* of Pseudo-Scymnus:

Εἴτ' αἰγιαλὸς τις Σαλμυδησοῦς λεγόμενος
 ἐφ' ἑπτακόσια στάδια τεναγώδης ἄγαν
 καὶ δυσπρόσορμος ἀλίμενός τε παντελῶς
 παρατέταται, ταῖς ναυσὶν ἐχθρότατος τόπος.
 Εἴτ' εὐλίμενος ἄκρα συνάπτει Θυνιας,
 ἧς Ἀστικῆς Θράκης ὑπάρχουσ' ἐσχάτη³

(the part was probably compiled to a great extent from the work of Demetrius of Callatis “On Europe and Asia” which had not survived), this area spread from Salmydessos – explicitly denoted as a stretch of coast of length 700 stadia and Tyniada Peninsula (the present-day İğneada burnu). Here its southern border was not fixed but by presumption it is to be sought to the north of the Straits at the European Black Sea coast.

Later, Strabo is more specific - Astica followed Salmydessos, whereas Tyniada Cape was the southernmost border of the Apollonian territory:

ἐν δὲ τῷ μεταξύ ἢ τε Θυνιας τῶν Ἀπολλωνιατῶν χώρα, καὶ
 Φινόπολις καὶ Ἄνδριακή, συνάπτουσαι τῷ Σαλμυδησοῦ. ἔστι
 δ' οὗτος ἔρημος αἰγιαλὸς καὶ λιθώδης, ἀλίμενος, ἀναπεπταμένος
 πολὺς πρὸς τοὺς βορέας, σταδίων ὅσον ἑπτακοσίων.⁴

It is a good attestation of territorial distribution but again it does not answer the question about the territory of Byzantion to the north. What can be said for sure is that the amorphous borders of Salmydessos were a kind of wedge between Apollonia to the north and Byzantion to the south.

¹Miller, J, “Byzantion”, *Paulys Real-Encyclopädie der Klassischen Altertumswissenschaft* III, Stuttgart, 1897, coll. 1143.

²Oberhummer, E, “Phileas”, *Paulys Real-Encyclopädie der Klassischen Altertumswissenschaft* XIX, 2, Stuttgart, 1938, coll. 2131-2132; see also M. H. Sayar “New approaches to trade in the southern Black Sea region”, *Proceedings of the Sixth International Congress on Black Sea Antiquities*, Constanta, 2017.

³Ps.Scymn. vv. 724-729, ed. Müller, Karl, GGM I, *Anonymi (vulgo Chymni Chii) Orbis descriptio*. Paris 1855, pp. 224-225.

⁴Strabo 7. 6. 1, ed. Meineke, Augustus, *Strabonis Geographica*. Leipzig, 1877, p. 439, text from www.perseus.com. Last visited on 30 November 2024.



Figure 1*Map of the probable immediate coastal territories of the Kingdom of Bizye*

They could be ascribed conditionally to the coastal territory of the Bizye kingdom. The grounds for that are not only geographically determined but also logically substantiated basing on the opportunity for provision of a sea outlet. Such a sea outlet could be the present town of Midiya/ Kırıkköy – at a distance of 40 km from Bizye, which has been identified with Salmydessos. It is not a coincidence that *urbs* and *oppidum* already occurred in the works of Pomponius Mela:

*Recta dehinc ora [sc. Ponti], nisi quod media ferme in promunturium quod Thynian vocant exit, et incurvis contra se litoribus obtenditur, urbesque sustinet Halmydeson et Philiis et Phinopolim. Hactenus Pontus*⁵

and Pliny the Elder:

*Astice regio habuit oppidum Anthium; nunc est Apollonia. flumina Panisos, Iuras, Tearus, Orosines; oppida Thynias, Halmydesos, Develton cum stagno, quod nunc Deultum vocatur veteranorum, Phinopolis, iuxta quam Bosphoros*⁶

This reservation is important with a view to tracing the movement of the very Byzantine territory in the 1st century AD.

First of all, the very status of Byzantium. Pliny⁷ is definite about it:

Byzantium liberae condicionis, antea Lygos dictum.

Did the city regain its freedom after the princeps Vespasian had deprived the city of its status of a free city, along with other leading centres and some areas in the Mediterranean? This piece of information furnished by Suetonius:

*Achiam, Lyciam, Rhodom, Byzantium, Samum libertate adempta, item Trachiam Ciliciam et Commagenen dicionis regiae usque ad id tempus, in prouinciarum formam redegit.*⁸

⁵Mela 2, 22, 23, ed. Parthey, Gustavus Pomponii Melae De chorographia libri tres. Berlin, 1867, p. 38.

⁶Plin. NH, 4. 11. 45, ed. Mayhoff, Karl, C. Plini Secundi Naturalis Historiae libri XXXVII. Leipzig, 1906, p. 317.

⁷Plin. NH, 4. 11. 46..

⁸Suet. Ves. 8, 4, ed. Maximilian Ihm. C. Suetonii Tranquilli Opera. De vita caesarum libri VIII. Leipzig, 1907, p. 315.

gives us the rare opportunity to have a look at the relations of the new capital of the world with the city at the Bosphorus. Whatever the measure taken by a member of the Flavian dynasty was, it was most probably even before his death that Byzantion regained its freedom again. Otherwise, Pliny's account:

*Sed a Bosporo sinus Lasthenes, Portus Senum et alter qui Mulierum cognomitur. Promunturium Chryseon Ceras, in quo oppidum Byzantium liberae condicionis, antea Lygos dictum...Amnes Bathynias, Pidasas sive Athyras. Oppida Selymbria, Perinthus, latitudine CC pedum continenti adnexa. Intus Bizye, arx regum Thraciae, a Terei nefasto invisus hirundinibus, regio Caenica, colonia Flaviopolis, ubi antea Caela oppidum vocabatur...*⁹

would not have been reflected at all. And to accept that Pliny who had close relations with the Flavian dynasty and occupied the position of *praefectus classis* of the fleet of Misenum had no information on the actual status of the city, would not be correct. Or, in any case, his opinion as a witness and even participant in the government would prevail over Suetonius who was comparatively more distant in terms of time.

The first part of Suetonius' testimony shows that the changes in Thrace - at least at the beginning, had not changed the status of the city: it remained an autonomous polis (at least c. 77 AD). It also pre-determined the existence of a polis territory whose integrity, at least at the beginning, had obviously not been modified by the Romans. Furthermore, the liquidation of the client kingdom centered in Bizya, had most probably made it possible that the new rulers of Thrace acknowledged the territorial possessions of Byzantion in Europe. Regarding this, the Romans were most probably led by the circumstance that the city had always been and remained one of the stable allies or at least a predictable partner of Rome in all the earlier conflicts, in particular the one with Mithridates VI Eupator. As we will see, the only condition that Rome laid down was that Byzantion guarantee the unhindered sailing in the Bosphorus from and to the Black Sea. It is as early as the time of the Roman Republic that some findings show the Romans' interest in the West Pontic coasts and not only with respect to their traditional trading partners there - the Greek *apoikia*. The discovery of hoards - for example, the one from Obzor with Roman Republican denarii hints at the possibility of stable contacts with the local population from the second half of the 2nd century BC on.¹⁰ Here we are also to mention the availability of lead stocks of the so called box-type with reinforcement collar which are related to Roman shipping and in particular to heavy-tonnage commercial cargo vessels as early as the 1st century AD.

⁹Plin. *NH* 4. 11. 46...

¹⁰Юркова, Йорданка, "Една находка от републикански денари от Черноморското крайбрежие", *Известия на Варненското археологическо дружество*, XIV, 1963, pp. 39-44. Паунов, Евгени, "Находката с републикански денари от Обзор / 1953: нов прочит", *Studia in honorem Alexandri Minchev (= Acta Musei Varnaensis*, vol. VIII-2), Варна, 2012, pp. 81-88.



Figure 2

Map of the Roman presence in Pontic Thrace (photos of Konstantin Gospodinov and Atanas Orachev)



The largest of them have been discovered far from the aquatories and the harbours of the Greek *poleis* of the West Pontic coast - again from Obzor to the north through Anchialo and the settlement near the present-day Ahtopol to the bay of Midiya/Kıyıköy.¹¹ This fact itself is enough to show the trends of Roman policy in Thrace on the eve of its constituting as a Roman province.

These contacts became relatively more regular in the Early Principate when to the north of the Balkan Mountains and by the Black Sea coast there was already the province of Moesia as from about 15 AD. The trade with Rome is also proved by the amphorae of Dressel 1B type discovered during field investigations in the layers of the present Ahtopol.¹²

¹¹ Gyuzelev, Martin, *The West Pontic Coast between Emine Cape and Byzantium during the First Millennium BC*, Burgas, 2008, pp. 223, 227, 279, Cat. Nos 4.7.1; 5.7.1.1; 11.4.1.1; see also Orachev, A, „Античните щокони котви, навигацията и пристанищната система на Аполония“, *Будител* 48, София, 2018, pp. 44-60.

¹² Господинов, К. and В. Мутафов, „Амфори тип Дресел 1 В от гр. Ахтопол“, *Известия на музеите от Югоизточна България*, 25, Сливен, 2010, pp. 39-46.

Figure 3

Amphorae Dressel 1B type found in Ahtopol (photo courtesy of Konstantin Gospodinov).



The Bosphorus was guaranteed for free access to Roman commercial and military ships. To this end, we should not ignore the monuments existing at the Strait itself - for example, the well-known so-called “*column of Pompeius*” at the European Kyaneai.

Figure 4

The altar of Apollo on the top of the Kyaneai (I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Prof. M. Sayar for the opportunity to use his photo of the altar)



It is a part of the altar of Apollo erected by the Romans with a dedicative inscription by Lucius Annidius Fronto:

*Caesari Augusto | f(e)c(i)t L(ucius) Annidius | L(uci) f(ilius) Cla(udia) Fronto*¹³

It is possible that this is the monument mentioned by Dionysius of Byzantium: *Supra Cyaneas ara existit Apollonis a Romanis statuta*, translated in Latin by Petrus Gyllius.¹⁴ The monuments along the shores of the Bosphorus itself are another evidence for the increased importance of the Bosphorians Strait – all of them are roughly dated back to the early 1st century AD. These are two epigraphic dedicative inscriptions from the harbour of Phidalia (Baltlımanı) - one of them is for gratitude to the Nereids for a good fish catch:

τόν με κυ]βιστητήρα τὸν ἐξ ἀλὸς οὐκέτι Νηρεὺς
[ποιμαίνει]· χέρσονδ' ὤδε μετωκισάμην·
[ῥ]λλαγμαὶ Νύμφας Νηρηΐσι καὶ πεπέδημαι
[νάματος ἀ]λλοτρίου τερπνοτέραις σταγόσιν·
[χαίροιτ' εἰ]ς κόλποιο μυχούς εὐίχθους ἄγραι·
[— —]ς χέρσωι πόντον ἀναινόμεθα.

and the other one for athletics competitions organized in the Byzantine month of Bosphorion:

Ὀλυμπιόδωρος Μενδι-
δώρου στεφανωθείς
τᾶι λαμπάδι τῶν ἀνή-
βων τὰ Βοσπόρια τὸ
ἄθλον Ἑρμᾶι καὶ Ἡρακλεῖ¹⁵

However, the most significant point connected with the shipping through the Thracian Bosphorus is the Hieron at the Asian coast of the Strait.

Fig. 5. The fortress above the ancient Hieron.

In this period it not only did not lose its importance but basing on the Stadiasmoi and periploi it was still considered as a key point for measurement of distances in the Black Sea and from the Mediterranean Sea to there¹⁶ (see Moreno 2007, 679). The Asian Hieron would probably have had the same advantages over any other harbour in connection with the wheat trade with the Bosphoran Kingdom of the Spartokides. Its importance as a trading partner and client of Rome grew with the trends of the Roman policy to the East and demonstrates the increased interest of the Caesars in the Black Sea. To Byzantium the new geo-political conditions were the necessary ground for the last period of heyday before the tremendous blow on the polis during the period of the Severan dynasty.



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¹³Sayar, M. 2017...

¹⁴Dion. Byz. *Αναρλ. Βοσρ.* 86 see Gyuzelev, M. *Дионисий Бизантийский и неговият Анаплус на Боспора като извор за историята и културата на Югоизточна Европа*, unpublished DSc diss., Sofia St. Kliment Ohridski University, 2015.

¹⁵Łajtar, Adam, *Die Inschriften von Byzantion*. Inschriften griechischer Städte aus Kleinasien, 58. Bonn 2000, IK Byzantium 10 and 11 = HPh Syll. 17, Parart. (1886) 187-188; CIG 2034 = SEG 14.483.

¹⁶Moreno, Alfonso, "HIERON. The Ancient Sanctuary at the Mouth of the Black Sea", *Hesperia* 77, 2008, p. 679.



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