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ANNEXING THE NEAR EAST AND THE LONG-LASTING BOSPORAN AUTONOMY*

by

MICHAŁ HALAMUS

ABSTRACT: This article discusses the historical and geopolitical conditions that enabled the two marginal Roman client states of Nabataea and Bosporus to postpone, or avoid altogether, incorporation into the Empire. It also questions the dominant Romanocentric scholarly consensus that client states that fulfilled certain socio-political requirements – for example, those that were highly Hellenised or those which protected the imperial border against the Parthian threat – were customarily annexed. Certainly, these factors were of great importance with regards to the process of facilitating direct Roman administration. However, this perspective is inverted in this paper in an attempt to explain that Nabataea and Bosporus' enduring autonomy was mainly due to their unique domestic character, accompanied by their remote localisation.

I. INTRODUCTION

The following article investigates the position of the Bosporan Kingdom in the context of early Roman Empire relationships with client kingdoms on its eastern fringe. Special attention is paid to the Nabataean Kingdom as it shared several common features with its Bosporan counterpart, i.e. they were both remotely located and both cultures included nomadic elements. Additionally, they were both ruled by local dynasties and had no direct borders with the Parthian Empire. Even though the battle of Actium marked the beginning of the radical transformation of the Roman state, the situation of Rome's *reges socii* did not change drastically at the time, since Octavian pragmatically extended his hand to most of Mark Antony's erstwhile clients, including the staunchly loyal and effective ruler of Judaea, Herod I; however, Octavian had no qualms about annexing certain client states, should it suit his purposes. Avoiding unnecessary conflicts, the emperor cultivated friendships with rulers of lands adjoining the eastern flank of the Empire, which helped to limit the number of legions stationed in the

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Eastern Mediterranean. Indeed, after the reconciliation between Augustan Rome and Parthia, the legions by and large stayed within the provinces, and their presence was barely visible in the East. This lull in military activity was not to last forever. In later centuries, the emperors decided to conquer some of Rome's eastern neighbours, with a concomitant increase in the number of locally stationed legions: in 23 CE, only four out of twenty five (4/25) legions were stationed in the area under discussion, whereas in the early third century the proportion shifted to ten out of thirty three (10/33)[1].

Roman military activity notwithstanding, in the time between Augustus and Trajan it was client kingdoms that served as the primary protectors of the Empire's eastern border between the Euxine and the Red Sea. Constituting a buffer zone between Rome and its neighbours, some of these local principalities (like Commagene or Armenia) faced both the Roman and the Parthian borders and were of primary importance to the Empire, whereas remoter client kingdoms bordered neither Parthia nor Rome, but could still be useful to Rome as a first line of defence against barbarian incursions. The article focuses on one such client state that managed to avoid annexation and retain its autonomy throughout several centuries, namely, the Bosporan Kingdom. This state was situated in the Eastern Crimea and on the western side of the Taman Peninsula; its capital was Panticapaeum (modern-day Kerch) and during antiquity it was surrounded by nomadic (mainly Scythian and Sarmatian) peoples. This study will analyse the main factors behind the retention of Bosporan independence. Also, placing the Bosporan Kingdom in a broader Near Eastern context, a comparison will be made with another remote political organism, the Nabataean Kingdom. The borders of the nomadic Nabateans are difficult to draw. The heartlands of their kingdom included parts of the Negev Desert, Judaea and the Arabian Peninsula, also touching upon the north-eastern shores of the Red Sea. The Nabataean capital was first located in inaccessible Petra, but later was probably located in Bosra[2].

Although most of such Near Eastern kingdoms disappeared during the first century, Bosporus and Nabataea managed to keep their autonomy: the Nabataean state came under direct Roman administration only shortly before Trajan's Eastern campaign (re-starting the Roman expansionist policy in the Middle East), whereas the Bosporan Kingdom remained formally independent until its demise in the mid-fourth century CE, as a Roman client kingdom under the rule of a single dynasty for an extended period of about four centuries[3]. Accordingly, the main aims of this paper are (1) to macroscopically analyse the Roman imperial policies on annexing its eastern client kingdoms in the first century CE and

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[1] Tac. *Ann*. IV 5; Millar 1993: 2–4.

[2] See mainly Gajdukevič 1971; Bowersock 1983.

[3] From the moment of the marriage between Mithridates VI Eupator's granddaughter, Dynamis, and Asander, the dynasty was in fact Pontic/Sarmatian.

(2) to ascertain why the Nabataean and Bosporan Kingdoms avoided the fate that befell other client states in the first century CE. Furthermore, there will be discussion on the key factors that allowed the rulers of the Cimmerian Bosporus to preserve their political status quo indefinitely and avoid annexation altogether.

II. EXAMPLES OF THE NEAR EASTERN CLIENT STATES AND THEIR RELATIONSHIPS WITH ROME

In the period between the battle of Actium (31 BCE) and Trajan's eastern campaign (115 CE), most eastern client states gradually came under direct Roman administration. Much of the process was a grassroots cultural movement: the Empire promoted the administrative model of the Greek *polis* among its eastern neighbours, whereas the local elite actively sought to curry favour with the Romans, which often went hand in hand with gaining access to the Senate[4]. Generally speaking, this first 'grassroots' stage in the process of the assimilation of neighbouring client states by the Empire culminated in 106 CE with the death of the last Nabataean king (Rabel II) and the subsequent incorporation of his kingdom by Rome. The general scholarly consensus depicts incorporated client kingdoms as victims of their own success: helping to introduce Roman administration and culture in their territories, they themselves facilitated their subsequent swift takeover[5]. Nonetheless, some examples prove that the growing Roman impact in the cultural and administrative spheres of eastern client kingdoms did not inevitably have to lead to annexation. The incorporation could be reversed, as happened in the states of Commagene, Judaea (in the early first century CE) and Osroëne (in the third century CE). Furthermore, the Roman administration appeared to have no grand strategy bent on incorporating their client kingdoms, instead preferring a flexible and reactive approach towards their eastern allies: by and large, the Empire refrained from meddling in the internal affairs of their client states' ruling dynasties – that is, as long as their independence benefitted the Empire.

Nonetheless, to examine the role played by Rome's eastern client states, one first needs to briefly reassess the complex political relationship between an average client state's ruler (*rex socius*) and Rome. *Reges socii*, enduringly introduced into modern nomenclature by Ernst Badian as "client kings"[6], were rendered differently by different scholars, who either accentuated their cooperation with Rome ("friendly kings", "allied kings") or their dependence on her might ("dependant", "vassal" or "petty rulers")[7]. Some attempted to define the relationship

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[4] Sartre 2013: 277.

[5] Sartre 2005: 70–74; Facella, Kaizer 2010b: 31.

[6] See Badian 1958.

[7] Facella, Kaizer 2010b: 20.

between *rex socius* and the emperor in terms of the *clientelae* system, with kings as *clientes* of the highest echelon and post-Augustan emperors as their patrons; nonetheless, this gross oversimplification obscures the finer points of their complex bond. When Rome began to expand its territory, the lands and people that they conquered became connected to her through the incorporation of customs and norms that were based on models taken directly from Roman society. This, along with Rome's ability to adjust these rules to suit particular states and regions, made the whole process successful. Thus, in most cases, the kings and princes were presented not as *clientelae*, but as friends and allies (*amici et socii*)[8]. The evidence concerning *reges socii* issued outside Rome mostly regards *amicitia*, however the ties between Greek cities and their Roman patrons seem more comparable (at least in nomenclature) to client–patron relations, due to the word *patronus* becoming an official term in the *poleis*[9]. Nevertheless, Christian Wendt points out that the term "friend", used in the context of international relations, was more neutral than "client" and could give an illusory view of the equity that existed between the two sides. Eventually, institutions like *amicitiae*, *foedera* and *deditiones* were used as tools that helped effect control over the subdued territories[10]. A relevant passage from Suetonius showcases the ambiguity of the imperial policy on *reges socii*[11]. Suetonius implies that the relationship between these kings and the emperor functioned following the fashion of a patron–client relationship (*more clientium praestiterunt*), but it was not identical; nevertheless, the historian and his peers (Tacitus and Strabo) stress that vassal kings, although not fully incorporated into imperial hierarchies, still played an integral part in the inner political workings of the Empire[12]. Building on this and other passages, David Braund stressed the ambiguity of the position friendly kings held in the imperial power structure: just like their fringe lands, they were neither fully within nor without[13].

The manner in which vassal kings expressed their loyalty to the Empire hints that the relationship in question operated both as an interpersonal and a political bond. Many rulers chose to socialise with the emperor: in his *Res Gestae*, Augustus informs us that, thanks to him, many foreign nations (*plurimaeque aliae gentes*) with their rulers (*reges*) sought Roman friendship and came to the capital in person or sent hostages[14]. A stay at the emperor's court left a favourable

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[8] Baltrusch, Wilker 2015b: 8 f.

[9] Coşkun 2005: 7.

[10] Wendt 2015: 22 f.

[11] Suet. *Aug*. 60, 1.

[12] For example Strabo XVII 3, 25; Tac. *Ann*. IV 5, 2.

[13] Braund 1984: 182.

[14] *RG* 31–33.

impression, convincing the emperor of the king's loyalty and allowing the king to gain a first-hand understanding of the Empire's inner workings and to establish a network of social relationships with members of the imperial elite[15]. If client rulers could not visit the capital in person, they sent their offspring and relatives as hostages, a practice that, in Olivier Hekster's words, transformed the capital into a "princely kindergarten"[16]. Nevertheless, it has to be stated at this point that the Romans usually saw vassal kings and their relatives as nothing more than representatives of their respective states, their personal worth determined solely by their importance to the Empire – regardless of any personal friendships they might have established with the emperor or members of the imperial elite[17].

The difficult transition from the Republic to the Empire fell together with Rome reconsidering her relationship with a group of previously independent vassal states. After the battle of Actium, the Romans seized control of all Mediterranean shores, some of them governed by client kings in Rome's name. After the bloody Mithridatic and civil wars, a period of relative peace began in the Roman East, giving the newly ascended emperor an occasion to consolidate his power over the local principalities. As was stated before, Augustus by and large continued Mark Antony's noninterventionist policy towards client states, but he also annexed some when the unfolding situation demanded it; for example, Rome's breadbasket, Egypt, was annexed immediately in 30 BCE. In the following century, Augustus' successors gradually incorporated the majority of independent eastern vassal states and principalities. Two kingdoms on the Black Sea littoral, Thrace and Pontus, lost their independence in 46 and 64 CE respectively; Cappadocia came under direct Roman administration in 17 CE, whereas the kingdoms of Commagene, Armenia Minor and Emesa did so in the early seventies CE. Nonetheless, some states managed to avoid incorporation, whereas others eventually regained their independence, demonstrating that this drive towards annexation was neither universal nor irreversible.

During the short reign of Caligula, six states (the Bashan and Abilene, Commagene-Cilicia, Lesser Armenia, Pontus, Thrace and Arqa) won back their autonomy[18]: out of these six, the history of Commagene demonstrates most vividly the complexities of the Roman client state annexation policy in the Near East. A buffer state initially encircled by Syria, Cappadocia, Cilicia, Armenia and Parthia, Commagene attracted the attention of regional powers from the beginning of the Roman presence in the region due to its geographical location. In the beginning its ruler, Antiochus, acknowledged the supremacy of Tigranes of Armenia; however, he switched allegiance to Pompey during his

[15] Braund 1984: 120–123.

[16] Hekster 2010: 54.

[17] Braund 1988: 93; Allen 2006: 20.

[18] Paltiel 1991: 306.

eastern campaign against Mithridates VI (64 BCE)[19]. Pompey greatly benefitted from Antiochus' loyalty: Commagene's location enabled the Roman general to control the lands by the Euphrates, whereas Antiochus' wealth and prestige reflected favourably on him as a politician. It was not so for Antiochus, who had to carefully manœuvre between power-hungry Roman generals and the menacing Parthia. Antiochus and his successors twice picked the losing side (first siding with Pompey and then with Antony); however, they briefly managed to retain their independence, as victors in Roman civil wars wished to continue their erstwhile opponents laissez-faire policy towards client states. It appears that, at that particular moment in Roman history, the advantages of maintaining numerous vassal states outweighed any political risks connected with their autonomy[20].

In case of Commagene, in the post-Augustan period emperors alternatively annexed or liberated the state as the situation demanded. Annexed after the death of Antiochus III (17 CE)[21], Commagene regained independence two decades later, when Caligula returned the kingdom to a royal descendant, Antiochus IV, its borders now also including Cilicia Trachea[22]. An independent Commagene advanced both Antiochus' and the Emperor's interests: Antiochus gained prestige as a client king and Caligula gained a trusted ally who could pacify rebellious and non-Hellenised local territories. Despite Antiochus' loyalty, in 72 CE Commagene inexplicably lost its sovereignty again. The official yet implausible explanation named the king's treachery, but the available evidence does not suggest any scheming on Antiochus' part. The re-seizing of Commagene allowed Rome to strengthen its borders. However, Roman military activity had already been increased in the region prior to the re-taking of the kingdom, and this flurry of military action was due to Rome's policy of expanding its eastern limits, rather than protecting what it already had. The role of the Parthian Empire was also of great importance in that regard, as under its successful leader Vologaeses I (51–78 CE), the empire managed to seize control over Armenia and also initiate an active and fruitful relationship with Rome[23]. In light of these facts, the reannexation of Commagene in 72 CE is best explained not as a Roman reaction to local unrest or to Antiochus' treachery, but above all a strategic land grab[24].

Judaea constitutes another fine example of a client state that went back and forth between a partially independent state and a province. Twice incorporated into the Roman Empire in 6 and 34 CE, Judaea briefly regained its sovereignty

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[19] Plut. *Pomp*. 36, 2; App. *Mith*. 106.

[20] Facella 2010: 192 f.

[21] Tac. *Ann*. II 42, 5.

[22] Suet. *Calig*. 16, 3; Dio LIX 8, 2.

[23] Dąbrowa 2010: 129; Olbrycht 2013: 224 f.

[24] Dąbrowa 1997: 110; Facella 2010: 196.

with the enthronement of Agrippa I under Claudius (41 CE), only to lose it again in 44 CE. The general Jewish uprising of 66 CE provoked a strong Roman response and quashed the insurgents' spirit, with the Temple destroyed and Judaea forcibly Hellenised[25]. The prior history of Judaea under the Herodians and their relationship with the Julio-Claudian emperors convinced the Roman administration that having a bold and resourceful client king like Herod I could be preferable to governing the unruly province[26]. However, one must note at this point that the special position Judaea supposedly held could be a fabrication of our embellished sources: granted, the land distinguished itself among other client kingdoms through its exceptional culture and the Herodians' political acumen, but Josephus' glowing account probably exaggerated its political importance within the Empire.

Cappadocia, ruled at that time by Archelaus, stands as another successful yet perhaps not so well-known country that managed to walk the fine line between independence and submission to Rome. A shrewd politician, Archelaus consistently expanded his territory: initially given Cilicia Trachea, he subsequently seized Armenia Minor and finally, thanks to his marriage with Pythodoris (Antony's granddaughter), he took over the Kingdom of Pontus[27]. Archelaus' new wife claimed Pontus as a widow after the Bosporan king Polemo I, killed by nomadic Aspurgians during his military campaigns[28]: through marriage, Archelaus became the king of the united Pontic-Cappadocian kingdom, a firm barrier against the Parthian expansion towards the eastern frontier of the Roman Empire.

Archelaus' life showcases that a client king's changing fortunes depended entirely on Rome: an alliance with one Roman official often entailed offending another contender for power, who could then exact his revenge on the client king. Ca. 1 BCE, Archelaus met with Augustus' step-son Tiberius and grandson Gaius Caesar on Samos or Rhodes[29]. During his stay on the island, Archelaus chose to support Augustus' heir apparent, Gaius Caesar, over Tiberius, who was subsequently exiled. This rational decision nevertheless had unforeseen and disastrous consequences for Archelaus, since Augustus' grandson died during the Armenian campaign and the slighted Tiberius unexpectedly gained power in 14 CE. Having never forgiven Archelaus, Tiberius took him prisoner and kept him in Rome as a hostage: the ageing king soon passed away, either murdered or driven to suicide, with his kingdom being incorporated in 17 CE[30]. Archelaus' long and successful reign over Cappadocia,

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[25] Sartre 2013: 289.

[26] Paltiel 1991: 21; Sartre 2013: 289 f.

[27] Romer 1985: 88.

[28] Strabo XII 2, 11.

[29] Romer 1985: 75 f.

[30] Hekster 2010: 45.

capped by his ignominious death in Rome, illustrates even more strikingly how fragile the position of the friendly king could be.

Case studies of Commagene, Judaea and Cappadocia clearly demonstrate why the Roman Empire benefitted from a network of client kings that guarded the Empire's flanks, brought in extra monies and, arguably, groomed their countries into vast swaths of annexation-ready Hellenised lands. *Reges socii* supported the Roman war effort with auxiliary troops, their lands buffering the Empire's borders from the often hostile external world[31]; additionally, they kept the peace in the Empire and neighbouring lands, suppressing piracy and other forms of banditry[32]. Of great importance was also the wealth a vassal king could deliver to the Empire: according to Tacitus and Josephus, king Antiochus IV of Commagene possessed the greatest riches of all *reges socii*, his regular contributions to Roman coffers certainly helping him maintain his position until 72 CE[33]. Finally, many scholars asserted that Roman client kingdoms existed only to be eventually annexed once conditions allowed it. Maurice Sartre conjectured that the Romans encouraged the client states to adopt the Greek model of *polis* in the East and Hellenise their elites: once properly assimilated, the Hellenised local elites would eventually smooth the transition from a semi-independent vassal state to a Roman province[34]. Indeed, in the case of Herodian Judaea, one observes Romans founding numerous *polis*-modelled settlements, a cultural counterbalance to the local Jewish communities[35]. However, Sartre's conjecture can be questioned, as the brief existence of an average client state was not usually conducive to the process of the extensive acculturation of local elites: for example, it is doubtful that the second annexation of Commagene in 72 CE happened primarily because by that point a larger proportion of its people had adopted Greek customs than they had in 17 CE.

Why exactly a given state would be incorporated or not remains a problematic issue, necessitating the adoption of a broader perspective on Roman imperialism. Client state annexations in the first century CE served to consolidate imperial power within the limits marked by the Roman generals of the late Republic. States central to the Roman interest tended not stay independent for very long, a fate that befell the strategically important Syria (incorporated by Pompey[36]) and the Parthia-oriented borderlands, the point of entry into the Roman East[37]. When the border of the Empire touched the Euphrates, Roman emperors followed in Crassus' and Mark Antony's

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[31] Facella, Kaizer 2010b: 26.

[32] *Bell. Alex*. 65, 5.

[33] Tac. *Hist.* II 81; Jos. *BJ* V 11, 3; Jos. *AJ* XVIII 7, 1.

[34] Sartre 2013: 278 f.

[35] Paltiel 1991: 21. Goodman (1987: 109–134) explains why this policy failed in Judea.

[36] Plut. *Pomp*. 39.

[37] Sartre 2005: 5.

footsteps and ran their incursions into Parthia, Trajan's expedition being followed by those of Lucius Verus and Septimius Severus[38]. All in all, the independence of Roman buffer states in the East appears to have lasted until the revival of Roman expansionist policy towards its eastern neighbours.

III. SOUTHERN FRINGE – NABATAEA

Geographically and politically isolated, this remote principality for the most part avoided attracting the attention of the imperial elite, appearing most often in recorded sources due to its perceived unruliness. The Nabataeans were often informally excluded from the ranks of *reges socii*. For example, Josephus narrates that Herod Agrippa I organised a summit in Tiberias in 43 CE, inviting both fellow client kings (Antiochus IV of Commagene, Polemo II of Pontus, Sapsigeratnus of Emesa, Cotys of Lesser Armenia and Herod of Chalcis) and C. Vibius Marsus, contemporary governor of Syria: the abortive meeting ended in diplomatic disaster after the governor sent away the newly arrived client kings[39]. Notably, Agrippa invited no emissary from Nabataea to the summit, probably due to the bitter and ever-increasing conflict between Nabataea and Herodian Judaea[40]: since the Roman administration tended to favour the Herodians, the Nabataeans eventually became embroiled in numerous conflicts with Rome. In the time of Augustus, Nabataean royal advisor Syllaeus, governing in place of king Obodas[41], had a long-running feud with Herod I[42]. Syllaeus, blamed for inadequately supporting Aelius Gallus' expedition to Arabia, was eventually caught and sentenced to death in Rome[43]. After Obodas' demise, a Nabataean ruler, Aretas, tested Rome's patience again by seizing the throne without Rome's explicit permission; nonetheless, Augustus eventually acknowledged his status as a *regius socius*[44]. Augustus' leniency caused trouble for Tiberius in his final year of life, as Judaea and Nabataea engaged in another major conflict. The emperor attempted to mollify the warring *reges socii*, ready to disturb the fragile peace at the Empire's eastern flank. Despite Tiberius' pacifying efforts, Nabataean king Aretas crushed Herod Agrippa's armies: the outraged Tiberius sent two legions to capture or kill the dissenting Nabataean – and he would have succeeded if not for his sudden death and the subsequent cancellation of the punitive expedition[45].

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[38] Sartre 2005: 87; Millar 1993: 492.

[39] Jos. *AJ* XIX 8, 1.

[40] Sullivan 1989: 208–213.

[41] Jos. *AJ* XVI 7, 6.

[42] Jos. *AJ* XVI 9, 1–3.

[43] Strabo XVI 4, 24.

[44] Jos. *AJ* XVI 9, 4.

[45] Jos. *AJ* XVIII 5, 1.

At this point one must note that the Nabataean kings – in direct contrast to the Herodians – owed their unique position not to Roman political support, but rather to the inaccessibility of their land and their fierce desire to remain independent. Diodorus, quoting Hieronymus of Cardia, noted that the Nabataeans, still nomadic at the end of the fourth century BCE, managed to successfully use their knowledge of the desert terrain in their favour during their struggle against the invading Macedonian commander, Antigonus[46]. The Nabataeans' pathfinding skills once again came to the forefront three centuries later, when a Roman expedition under the command of Aelius Gallus failed to conquer the so-called Arabia Felix[47]. Gallus asked the desert nomads to guide the Roman army through the inhospitable wastes of Arabia, but preserved sources imply that the Nabataeans deliberately gave the Romans wrong directions, as a Roman presence in that region was not in their interest[48].

What furthermore distinguished the Nabataeans from their neighbours was their mastery over water management techniques in the inhospitable desert environment: their desert subsistence farming techniques at some point became reliable enough for them to adopt a sedentary lifestyle[49]. Their greatest asset, however, was their land's strategic location at the crossroads between Egypt, Judaea, the Levant, the Red Sea and Mesopotamia, a veritable trading hotspot. Strabo describes their *de facto* capital of Petra as a bustling trade centre often visited by foreign merchants[50]. To boost their roaring trade in aromatics imported from Arabia and the Red Sea coast, the Nabataeans widely adopted Aramaic (which they used in inscriptions); however, their culture also exhibited certain Graeco-Roman influences[51]. From Pompey onwards, the Romans recognised the strategic importance of Nabataean trade in the region, cooperating with them and importing Arabian wares[52]. However, Nabataean–Roman relations soured in the second half of the first century CE, as the Nabataean kings increased their pressure on Judaea; concurrently, the economic significance of Petra dwindled as other regional trade centres, such as Palmyra and Egypt, took over much of its trade. At this period of time, the Nabataeans moved the administrative centre of their state northwards, from Petra to the city of Bosra, perhaps in response to changes in trade routes[53].

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[46] Diod. Sic. XIX 94.

[47] Cass. Dio LIII 29. See also Marek 1993.

[48] Strabo XVI 4, 22–24; Bowersock 1983: 48 f.

[49] Erickson-Gini (2012: 50–54) argues that in the Hellenistic and Roman periods the Nabataeans had only subsistence agriculture, producing their first surpluses only in Late Antiquity.

[50] Strabo XVI 4, 21.

[51] Paltiel 1991: 27; Sartre 2005: 86.

[52] Bowersock 2003: 21; Paltiel 1991: 30 f.

[53] Bowersock 2003: 22; Bowersock 1983: 64 f.

Rabel II, the last king of the Nabataeans, passed away in 106 CE: emperor Trajan, who perhaps had already been planning his future eastern campaign against Parthia, did not hesitate to annex Rabel's peripheral client state. Extant sources do not speak of Nabataean resistance to Roman annexation, which suggested to many that the desert tribes put up no fight against their invaders, although the serious forces gathered by the Romans can indicate an existing threat of Nabataean resistance[54]. The new province of Arabia hosted two legions, *legio III Cyrenaica* in Petra and *legio VI Ferrata* in Bosra, the latter under the command of the new provincial governor, Claudius Severus. The unusually high number of soldiers stationed in one province (including remote locations such as the outpost in the Farasan islands) demonstrates that the Roman administration placed great importance on the safety of regional trade routes, especially those that facilitated trade in aromatics[55]. Nevertheless, Roman control over the Red Sea trade routes can be traced back to Augustus' reign; apparently Aelius Gallus' expedition must have resulted in some long lasting effects which allowed the Nabataeans to increase their influence on the Arabian Peninsula[56]. Also, the *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea* mentions a "centurion" who was responsible for taxation in the Nabataean harbour of Leuke Kome, which suggests that Rome was collecting the taxes from Nabataean trade directly during the late Julio-Claudian dynasty, long before annexation[57]. However, Glen Bowersock rejects the theory that the tax collector was Roman, suggesting instead that he was a Nabataean administrator[58].

There are several compelling reasons for Rome's annexation of Nabataea. These include the fact that the previous disobedient royal dynasty had left behind a well-governed kingdom; also, a change in the way that people lived (going from a nomadic to a sedentary lifestyle) enabled the governance of previously dispersed tribes. Bowersock accentuates that becoming a Roman province did not drastically change the Nabataeans' daily lives: granted, Greek culture became more influential and certain oaths, previously sworn in the name of king, now had to be sworn in the name of emperor, but the Arabic culture of this territory was by and large preserved without interruption. Nabataean society continued to function for several centuries: the last inscription found in Petra dates to the mid-fourth century CE, but traces of human activity suggest the site was occupied up to the sixth century CE[59].

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[54] Sartre 2005: 87; Bowersock 2003: 22 f.; Bowersock 1983: 81 f.

[55] See Bukharin 2005–2006.

[56] Speidel 2015: 249, 258.

[57] *PME* 19.

[58] Bowersock 1983: 70 f.

[59] Bowersock 2003: 24.

IV. NORTHERN FRINGE – BOSPORUS

At the same time, on the northern fringe of the eastern border of the Empire one finds the Bosporan Kingdom, a client state that also managed to avoid being annexed in the first century CE. As with the Nabataean Kingdom, the nomads and their culture played an important role in the history of this state, but it was the Greek element that helped to establish and consolidate the Cimmerian Bosporus. In the first half of the fifth century BCE, existing Greek colonies in the eastern part of Crimea and the Taman Peninsula united and became jointly known as the Bosporan Kingdom, their unification most probably being a means to effectively withstand the constant pressure from neighbouring tribes[60]. In due time, this kingdom came under the rule of the Thracian-Greek dynasty of Spartocids, who gained control over vast territories on the eastern coast of the Azov Sea and founded the city of Tanais at the mouth of the river Don[61]. The culturally diverse Bosporan Kingdom and its neighbouring lands hosted the Greek-descended city dwellers, the tribes of Tauri and Maeoti, the nomads from the vast Eurasiatic steppe (Scythians and Sarmatians), and, last but not least, the Romans, who first appeared in the region in the first half of the first century BCE.

At the end of the second century BCE, the Bosporan kingdom became one of Mithridates VI Eupator's dominions. After his fall, the kingdom gravitated towards the Roman sphere of influence, as Eupator's son, Pharnaces II, paid homage to Pompey[62]. From that moment onwards, the Bosporus, under the rule of the new Mithridatic dynasty, remained a Roman client state for over four centuries and (initially together with Pontus and Thrace) played an important role in Roman policy towards the east. Client kings of Bosporus, ruling from Panticapaeum, did not grow complacent under Roman protection, but actively engaged in the politics of the region, intermittently having to confront their meddling overlords to maintain Bosporan independence. The first king to defy Romans was Pharnaces II, who engaged Julius Caesar and lost to him in the battle of Zela[63]. Caesar wished to check the rebellious kingdom and sent the trusted Mithridates II of Pergamum to seize the Bosporan throne, then held by Pharnaces II's successor, Asander, who decided to fight and eventually managed to hold the kingship. Three decades later, the Romans sent the king of Pontus, Polemo I, to ascend the Bosporan throne and quell the rebellion that erupted when Asander's troops deserted him for the Roman usurper Scribonius. Asander's wife, queen

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[60] Gajdukevič 1971: 32–49.

[61] Kutinova 2011: 121.

[62] App. *Mith*. 113.

[63] Plut. *Caes.* 50; Suet. *Jul*. 37; Nawotka 1992: 34 f.; Frolova, Irleand 2002: 5; Saprykin 2005: 168.

Dynamis, initially sided with and married Polemo, but later she and Asander's son Aspurgus prevailed over Polemo and regained the throne[64]. To some extent, constant power struggles in the Bosporan kingdom resulted from inept Roman interference in the Black Sea region. According to Sergey Saprykin's interpretation, the Romans wanted to unify all Pontic client kingdoms – or at least link separate kingdoms through one ruling dynasty. They almost attained the second goal when Mark Antony assigned the rule of Cilicia Trachea to Zeno of Laodicea, a famous orator and Antony's friend, father to Polemo and grandfather to Antonia Tryphaena. Zeno's relatives, in-laws and associates at one point ruled over several Pontic kingdoms. Polemo's wife Pythodoris controlled Pontus and Cappadocia, whereas Thrace was held by Cotys III, who married Antonia Tryphaena (daughter of Polemo and Pythodoris). In Bosporus one found Aspurgus, son of Dynamis (former spouse of Polemo I), who ascended to the throne at least in 6/7 CE[65]; later on, Aspurgus wed Gepaepyris, apparently a Thracian relative of Cotys III and Tryphaena[66]. In such a way, a single sprawling dynasty united many Euxine lands, a scenario that the Romans actively encouraged to ensure their own safety.

In direct contrast to Thrace and Pontus, Bosporus never became a Roman province: Roman emperors never decided to incorporate the uncontrollable kingdom, ultimately learning that meddling in Bosporan affairs tended to arouse a lingering anti-Roman sentiment and stiffen local resistance. The last serious anti-Roman revolt in the Bosporus (directed by Mithridates VIII) took place during the reign of Claudius, seemingly a perfect opportunity for the Romans to finally annex the vassal territory. As narrated by Tacitus, the conflict showcased the Roman attitude towards lands on the northern Black Sea coast and their manner of dealing with deposed client kings. As noted before, ancient historians did not devote much attention to the vassal kings and their affairs, unless they enjoyed particular favour with the Imperial elite, or behaved in an unusual and noteworthy fashion. Since many client kings periodically visited Rome, this was the context in which their deeds were recorded for posterity. Many kings ended their lives in the capital, some taken as hostages, others as war trophies presented to the people during the triumphal procession. It was not so with the rebellious Bosporan king Mithridates VIII, who came to Rome after losing the aforementioned war[67]. Thanks to the deal he negotiated with Claudius, Mithridates VIII was spared from being paraded during the triumphal procession. According to Tacitus, the Emperor agreed to Mithridates' terms because he:

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[64] Strabo XI 2, 11. The so-called "second reign" of Dynamis is disputable. See: Saprykin 2002: 96–105; Ivantchik, Tokhtas'ev 2011: 170 f.; Zavoykina, Novichikhin, Konstantinov 2018: 680–688.

[65] Zavoykina, Novichikhin, Konstantinov 2018: 680–688.

[66] Saprykin 2005: 171 f.

[67] Tac. *Ann*. XII 15–22.

> ...though merciful to foreign princes, was yet in doubt whether it were better to receive the captive with a promise of safety or to claim his surrender by the sword. To this last he was urged by resentment at his wrongs, and by thirst for vengeance. On the other hand it was argued that it would be undertaking a war in a country without roads, on a harbourless sea, against warlike kings and wandering tribes, on a barren soil; that a weary disgust would come of tardy movements, and perils of precipitancy; that the glory of victory would be small, while much disgrace would ensue on defeat[68].

In short, Tacitus claims that sending legions to fight for such a remote and irrelevant place as the Bosporus was hardly worth the imperial attention. Because of his direct and slightly arrogant behaviour towards Claudius, Mithridates was captured and brought to Rome by the procurator of Pontus. Although spared by Claudius from being derided in a parade, Mithridates had to spend the rest of his life in Rome, where he became a renowned and influential person[69]. In Mithridates' absence, Claudius gave the Bosporan kingdom to Mithridates' brother Cotys, succeeded by Rhescuporis I. After Cotys' death, the kingdom briefly remained under Roman rule for a few years until Rhescuporis came of age. From Rhescuporis' ascension onwards, the Bosporan rulers uninterruptedly maintained the role of *reges socii* as part of the Roman–Bosporan status quo over the course of the next three centuries[70].

What exactly discouraged the Romans from annexing Bosporus remains open for debate. Certainly, its geographical isolation played a significant role, since the region had no land borders with any other Roman province. Described by Tacitus as an uncharted wilderness full of hostile tribes, Bosporus would certainly have proved difficult to subdue, although one must remember that Bosporus' purported inaccessibility could have very well been a Roman literary cliché, the proverbial ruggedness of the Black Sea area being exemplified most clearly in Ovid's *Tristia*[71]. In contrast to Nabataea, the Cimmerian Bosporus was a cultured land of many Greek cities, no less opulent and Hellenised than any other eastern client kingdom. The kingdom was not so remote as to not have any Roman military presence at all. Roman troops were stationed in the Crimea and the Bosporan Kingdom until the third century CE[72]: epigraphic evidence points to the fact that the so-called Thracian and Cypriote cohorts stayed in Panticapaeum in the first half of the third century CE[73], while the garrison at the Roman fort at Charax was

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[68] Tac. *Ann*. XII 20 (transl. by A.J. Church, W.J. Brodribb).

[69] His further history is described by Plut. *Galba* 15, 1.

[70] Nawotka 1989: 337 f. The whole stormy period in the history of the Bosporus (2nd half of the 1st cent. BCE–1st half of the 1st cent. CE) is discussed by Saprykin 2002.

[71] For example *Trist*. V 7, 9–14, 51 f.; Nawotka 1997: 56 f.

[72] Ivantchik 2014: 190.

[73] *SEG* LV 862; *CIRB* 691; 728.

also established at some point[74]. Occasionally, the Roman military left their posts to provide support to beleaguered Crimean cities: for example, during the sixties of the first century CE, Tiberius Plautius Silvanus led his army in support of the city of Chersonesus in its struggle against the invading Scythians[75].

Most significantly, the main reason behind the Bosporan client state's continued independence was its exceptional sociocultural make-up. From the first century BCE onwards, the Bosporan Kingdom underwent so-called Sarmatisation. Epigraphic, archaeological and iconographic material indicated an ever-increasing number of Sarmatian names amongst the inhabitants of the Bosporus; Sarmatian tribal leaders established close relationships with Bosporan rulers and contingents of the Sarmatian cavalry began to play an ever-growing role in the Bosporan army[76]. The emergent Sarmatian influence in Bosporus is best demonstrated through the example of the Aspurgians. Strabo describes the Aspurgians as a Sarmatian faction that supported queen Dynamis' son Aspurgus in his war against the Roman-ordained king Polemo I, who died fighting on the Taman Peninsula in 8 BCE. Interestingly, Strabo's passage may have captured an influential Sarmatian social group *in statu nascendi*[77]: after their brief appearance in Strabo's text, the previously insignificant Aspurgians suddenly resurface in the first half of the third century CE, described in a number of inscriptions as a well-organised and influential social faction[78]. Also significant was the fact that the Bosporan Kingdom did not neighbour a serious power capable of threatening the Romans, instead facing the vast Eurasian steppe and its nomadic peoples of Iranian stock. This remote location made this marginal kingdom the perfect buffer state, securing the Roman flank at the north-eastern fringes of the Empire.

V. CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, the Nabataean and Bosporan kingdoms, two marginal Roman client states on the Eastern border of the Empire, had little in common directly; however, the history of their annexation or lack thereof proves that their ultimate fate depended on the same set of factors that influenced Roman imperial policy. In contrast to many other eastern client states, both Nabataea and Bosporus were ruled by dynasties that legitimised their status by claiming pre-Roman ancestry. Remarkably, individual members of these royal houses felt empowered enough

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[74] Zubar 2005: 179.

[75] Even if we take into consideration the point of view of Sarnowski (2006: 259), an intervention in some form must have taken place: Zubar 2005: 176; *IOSPE* I² 420.

[76] Mielczarek 1999: 80–89; Mielczarek 2014: 14–16; Ustinova 2000: 153; Mordvintseva 2013: 216; Tokhtas'ev 2013; Halamus 2017: 192 f.

[77] Saprykin 1985; Halamus 2017: 191 f.

[78] *CIRB* 36; 1246; 1248.

to defy the Romans in order to advance their own interests, although with varying degrees of success[79]. It seemed that, among other factors, being ruled by a local dynasty was the key to a country's autonomy. In the case of Nabataea, its eventual annexation could have been brought about by its dynasty dying out, whereas Bosporus' independence ended with its last ruler, sometime in the second half of the fourth century CE[80].

Another important factor shared by the two states was their nomadic culture and its impact on their history. In the Bosporan kingdom, the nomads constituted a significant portion of the society due to Bosporus being an amalgam of Greek and barbaric communities: later on, the Sarmatian culture played an important role in Bosporan–Roman relations. However, in contrast to the predominantly Arabic Nabataea, the Greek cities exerted just as profound an influence (or even a greater one) on Sarmatian elements in Bosporus, ensuring the state remained part of the Graeco-Roman cultural milieu for some nine centuries. Therefore, case studies of Nabataea, Commagene, or Bosporus demonstrate that the relative degree of a given state's Hellenisation – which, as Sartre erroneously held, directly correlated with the Romans' willingness to annex it – in fact mattered little in imperial policy: Nabataea and Commagene, two client states with relatively few Greek cities, still became provinces, whereas the more urbanised and Hellenised Bosporus remained independent and separated from Rome by land and sea. This geographical separation, coupled with the unruliness of the local population and the lack of economic significance to Rome were the main reasons why the Empire never properly incorporated the Black Sea country.

University of Wrocław

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[79] In Bosporus for example Pharnaces, Asander, Dynamis, Mithridates VIII, and in Nabataea Aretas IV, Obodas/Syllaeus.

[80] Bowersock (1983: 80) points out that Rabel II had successor. However, he admits that Trajan had probably waited for the ruler's death.

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