

CULT OF MITHRAS AND THE MITHRAS DESCRIPTIONS ON TRAPEZOUS CITY COINS

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Mithras cult is one of the most mysterious cults of the ancient period. In the present article, general information about Mithras cult is given and then observations relating the Mithras Descriptions found on Trapezous City Coins are provided.

Mithras descriptions on the coins of Trapezous (=Trabzon), one of the most important harbour cities of the Pontus region during the antique period, are official documents which depict the fact that cult of Mithras was an important cult both in the Roman Empire and in Trebizond (Map 1).

A considerable literature exists on the colonization of Trapezous, a small city which was located in the skirt of the Boztepe Hill, surrounded by city ramparts (Özsait 2000 38). While Xenophon (Xenophon 140 VII 22), who lived in the fifth century BC, describes Trapezous as a colony of Sinope, Strabon (Strabon VII 7) claims it is a colony of Miletos and moreover, some researchers point out that Eusebius, who lived in the fourth century AD, dated the foundation of Trebizond as 756 BC. (Robinson 1906 14; Myres 1907 128-129; Dunham, 1915 50; Cook 1946 78-79; Hind 1988 207; Tsetschladze 1994 115; Freely 2002 125), Roebuck (Roebuck, 1959 121-124) and Bouzek (Bouzek 1990 174 – 175) as contemporary researchers argue that Trapezous was founded in the eighth century BC (Sulmirski 1973 11; Koshelenko- V. D. Kuznetsov 1996 17; Lloyd 1997 82; Tekin 2001 51) during the Greek colonization of the Black Sea (Graves 2003 139) as a place of fishery and commerce, and was called 'Emporio'). Drews (Grews 12976 18), however, brings the foundation date of Trapezous back to the seventh century BC.

Founded as a colony, Trapezous remained a harbour of major significance in the transport of iron and copper from the mines in Transcaucasia (Çiğdem 2007 1-3) to other places in the west. Moreover, Trapezous was situated at the end of the two important commercial routeways extending from the south and the east (Özsait 2000 38). The southern cities of the Black Sea region, including Trapezous, were independent during the reign of the Persian in the related region since they were hard to reach without fleet and far away from the centres under the control of the Persian. During the East campaign, the king of Macedonia, Alexander the Great, excluded the shores from his campaign. After Alexander's death, the control of Trapezous and the surrounding places was obtained by king Eumenes (Özsait 2000 39).

Founded at the beginning of the third century in Kimiata in the skirts of Olgassys (=İlgaz) by I. Mithridates, the Kingdom of Pontus, expanded in a short period of time. The kingdom, whose first capital city was Amaseia, made Sinope the capital city after having captured it (Strabon XII 3 1). The last king of the Kingdom of Pontus, Mithridates Eupator VI, who extended his power over the east, handled the control of Black Sea shore in which Trapezous had taken place (Strabon XII 3 38).

Trapezous functioned as the draft base of the Roman army during the campaign against the king of Parth, Tridates, in the reign of Emperor Nero (Özsait 2000 39-40). The commander

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'Emporio' means "Exchange". Tekin 2001 51.

of the navy of Polemon II, Anicetus, occupied Trapezous after a rebellion and burnt some of the ships. However, the crisis was neutralized by Viridius Geminus, who was sent by emperor Vespasianus (69-79 A. D.) (Tacitus III 147). The city, which became the naval base of Rome again after these events, was given the status of *Liberium Oppidum* (= Independent city) (Starr 1943 62). Started by Vespasianus, the reconstruction of the city was maintained by Hadrian, who visited the city for the second time in 129 AD (Macdonald 1926 2; Özsaıt 2000 39 -40; Freely 2002 125).

Before analyzing the effects of Mithras' cult on coin types from Trapezous, brief mention should be made of Mithras and his cult.

Although there are archaeological findings relating Mithras' cult in Anatolia, almost no Turkish researchers dealt with this issue except a few². However, in archaeological excavations conducted in Europe, especially in Germany, Italy, France, Spain, England, and also in the Balkans, a number of findings related to the temples of Mithras ('Mithraeum') and Mithras himself were discovered and several publications about them appeared (Arslan 1999 425-426). Particularly, the Belgian scientist Cumont (Cumont 1896 1899; Cumont 1956) contributed highly with his writings to a better understanding and introduction of the Mithras' cult. The most recent view about the origin and the main characteristics of the Mithras' cult was presented in Ulansey's work³.

Mithras, whose name means "an agreement based on contract" etymologically, is called "Mitra" in Sanskrit, "Mithra" in Pahlavi languages, and "Mithras" in Greek and Latin (Arslan 1999 426). Although the name of Mithra firstly appears in the inscriptions of Artaxerxes II, along with Ahura Mazda (DA "Mithras" 1944), there is a different narration in the god's birth myths. Accordingly, Mithra was born by a river with a Phrygian bonnet on his head, and the shepherds around hid him somewhere on the mountain (Şahin 2001 105). Vermaseren and Ulansey, however, argue that the mentioned god is mostly described as having been born from rocks as far as the existing iconographies of Mithras are concerned (Vermaseren 1963 75; Ulansey 1998 47; Arslan 1999 431).

The origin of the Mithras cult's has led to various debates and arguments in recent years. The main question here is whether the Mithras' cult is originally an Iranian religion or one created by the western world. While such researches as Cumont (Cumont Mithra I), Laeuchli (Laeuchli 1968) and Ghirshman (Ghirshman 1963) claim that Mithras' religion is an Iran-originated religion, Ulansey (Ulansey 1998) has put forward that Mithras' cult is a secret religion which was created in the west, an idea that has recently come to the fore.

Whatever its origin, the Mithras' cult is certainly considered to be one of the most mystical cults of ancient times that spread over a vast geographical area. This cult played so major a role especially during the rule of the Roman Empire that the greatest Roman emperors purely depended on this cult, which then became the most important rival of Christianity. E. Renan, who has carried out studies in this field, stated that "if Christianity had been stopped by a fatal disease when it first appeared, the entire world would have been Mitraic" (Renan, 1923).

Ceremonies associated with this mysterious cult took place in temples called 'Mithraeum', which were generally built in caves or underground (Fig. no 1). Entrance to these temples was through a staircase of seven steps⁴. The interior part of the temples consisted of a vaulted living room which symbolized the sky and there were seats along the two sides of the

² M.Arslan, S. Şahin and İ.Kızgıt have done different researches about Mithras.

³ Ulansey believes that Mithras is a type of Persian cult, and that it is a secret religion which had changed its name, Ulansey 1998.

⁴ These seven stairs should have symbolized sky seven layer.

respectful cults in Tarsos (Fig. no 4). Moreover, Ramsay (Ramsay 1907) put forward that when the Greek came to the Cilicia region, they associated Perseus with the Sandan, the local god of the region.

Vermaseren (Vermaseren 1963) expressed that Mithras was worshipped in Tarsos, the capital city of Cilicia, and that it was revealed from the scenes of killing the bull on the coins belonging to the reign of Gordianus III (Fig. no 5).

All these examples indicate that both Perseus and Mithras were important in Cilicia region and especially in Tarsos. Furthermore, the studies revealed significant connections between Perseus and Mithras, which can be explained as follows:

1. The astronomical fact showing that Perseus constellation occupies the same place as it does in the Mithras touroctoni.
2. The striking mythological and iconographic similarities between two figures. (Both of them wear Phrygian bonnet, reminiscent of the mythology in which Perseus cuts the head of Gorgo Medusa, and Mithras as looking at different directions while killing the bull.)
3. The historical and geographical evidence that depicts the Cilicia, Perseus cult center, as the source of Mithraism (Ulansey 1998 56).

If the Perseus cult forms the Mithras cult's origin and if the Mithras cult is related to the sky, it would not be incorrect to mention directly or indirectly the existence of a Mithras cult in Pontus region, where star descriptions, Perseus, Gorgo, Helios and Apollon were frequently encountered. Therefore, as far as the Black Sea coins are concerned, the fact that all the descriptions we have so far mentioned exist on them receives attention.

It is realised that Cilician pirates and also Pontus king Mithridates played an important role in the spread of Mithras cult over Pontus region and Rome. It is alleged that Pontus King Mithridates⁶ allied with Cilician pirates in the struggle against the Roman; and that this military alliance was at a higher level than it should have been (App. Mith 14 92). In relation with the mentioned military alliance, Ormerod expressed in his book in which he examines the situation of piracy in ancient era that Cilician pirates had a close relationship with the great king Mithridates known as Mithras, the Persian God (Ormerod 12978 210-211). In addition, it can be seen that the king Mithridates, who believed to have descended from the family of Perseus, showed himself as Perseus on some coins minted in Pontus region. On the coins, Perseus is described as having different figures and there are some figures related to Perseus like Gorgo.

Having done researches on the coins of the region, Wroth stated in his study in the British Museum named "Greek Coins Catalogue" that all the descriptions on Pontus coins have emphasized a point, which is the fact that Mithridates' origin was Persian through the mythological hero Perseus (Wroth 1889 Pl. XXV) (Fig. no 6). Furthermore; Nock claimed that Perseus on Amisos coins is the ancestor of Mithridates (Nock 1928 33 fn. 59). Thus, it can be said that this cult was transferred to Mithridates by Cilician pirates, and that Mithridates was transferred to the Roman Empire during the struggles between himself and the Roman legions.

As far as the use of Mithras descriptions before the rule of the Roman Empire in Black Sea region is concerned, it is observed that the earliest Mithras description was worked up on a series of silver Amastris coins dated 300-285 B. C. (Fig. no 7) (SNGvAulPontus no. 152 6798-

⁶ Mithridates VI Eupator, who ruled over Anatolia for a short time in the 1st century B.C., was the last and most powerful King of the Pontos Dynasty, which was founded by Mithridates II of Sus, a Persian noble man. Having captured a large part of Anatolia in 88 B.C., Mithridates VI fought against the Romans in long-term struggles called 'Mithridates Wars' and after having gained various victories, he was defeated by the Roman general Pompeus Magnus in 66 B.C., following which he lost his power. Mansel 1995 488-489; Ulansey 1998 107. See Arslan 2007 for detailed information about Mithridates VI Eupator.

6800). On a silver coin belonging to Pharnaceia city, there is a figure with a Phrygian hat on the obverse side and a star description on reverse (SNG XI William Stancomb Collection no. 722) (Fig. no 8). It has highly probable that the description on observe side is Mithras. On the reverse side of one of the coins belonging to the reign of the Pontus king Pharnakes I (185-169 B. C.) is another description of Mithras as he is standing with a Phrygian bonnet on his head, together with a star description (Rec. Gen., 12, Pl. I, Fig. no 7- 9; SNG *vAulPontus* no. 2- 3) (Fig. no 9). Whereas Perseus is described with Gorgo head and harpa in his hand in the coins of Mitridates IV (Rec. Gen. 12, Pl. 1, Fig. no 11-12; SNG *vAulPontus* no. 6674), it is realised that grazing Pegasus and star descriptions take place on reverse sides of golden and silver coins belonging to the reign of Mithridates VI Eupator (Rec. Gen. 13 – 20, Pl. II, Fig. no 1-12; SNG *vAulPontus* no. 6-10; Arslan, 2007, 151; Tekin, 2007, 164) (Fig. no 10). Besides these examples, such descriptions as head of Perseus, head of Gorgo, grazing Pegasus, stars on the Dioscurides pilei and Perseus types with head of Gorgo Medusa and harpa in their hands, all of which are related to Mithras cult, appear as common type on the bronze coins minted in Amastris, Sinope, Amisos, Komana and Khabakta cities belonging to the period of Mithridates VI Eupator and reflecting the king's unitary coinage policy, (Tekin 2007 166) (Fig. no 11). All these examples prove that in Black Sea region before the rule of the Roman Empire, there was a deeply-rooted Mithras tradition. Apart from the coins on which Mithras was worked up directly, for which Trebizond can be shown as the main example, such descriptions as Dioscurides, Helios and Men on Neocaesareia coins, Ahura Mazda on Ameseia coins, goddess on Comana coins, and Anahita or Anaitis temple on Ma and Zela coins demonstrate that Mithras tradition had continued to exist in Roman Period (Arslan 1999 440).

It is also suggested that there was a Mithras temple in the north foot of Minthrion, known as Boztepe today, in Trapezous in ancient period, that it was therefore called Minthrion Hill, and that a tomb on this hill belonging to Aleksios IV was built inside a cave where there was a holy source and there had previously been a Mithras temple there before (Bryer and Winfield 1985 223; Umar 2000 127; Freely 2004 132). Moreover, it is claimed that the protective saint of Trapezous, Eugenios, threw the Mithras statue there from the cliff and because of that he was executed and buried in this place (Umar 2000 127). This information and the existence of Mithras descriptions on the city coins of Roman period minted in Trapezous clearly depict that there was a type of worship related to Mithras in the city.

Mithras descriptions take place on nine of the Trebizond city coins of Roman period in the Trabzon Museum. Among these, two coins belong to the reign of Commodus (117- 192 A. D.) (Fig. nos 14-15), two others to the reign of Caracalla (193-217 A. D.) (Fig. nos 16-17), two coins to the reign of Geta (209-212 A. D.) (Fig. nos 18-19), one to the period of Alexander Severus (222-235 A. D.) (Fig. no 20), one to the period of Tranquilina (Gordianus III' wives) (241-244 A. D.) (Fig. no 21) and one coin belongs to the reign of Octacilia Severa (Philippus I'wives) (244-249) (Fig. no 22).

On these coins, Mithras is described as having two different figures: While it is described with a radiate drape, Phrygian bonnet and horse proteome on the coins numbered 1-2 as belonging to the period of Commodus; on the ones numbered 3-4 as belonging to the period of Caracalla and on the coin numbered 5 as belonging to the period of Greta, it is described on a horse with Phrygian bonnet on his head, together with a tree behind him and an altar in front of him on the coins numbered 6 as belonging to the period of Geta, numbered 7 as belonging to the period of Alexander Severus, numbered 8 as belonging to the period of Octasilia and numbered 9 as belonging to the period of Tranquillina (Fig. no 22).

The radiate drape and Phrygian bonnet on Mithras' head in Fig. no 14, 15, 16, 17, 18 in which Mithras' bust is shown remind us of Mithras' relation with the god Helios. While in some

descriptions Mithras is shown more powerful than Helios (Ulansey 1998 122 Fig. no 7,9,10) in some other ones he is reflected as equal with him (Ulansey 1998 126). And in some inscriptions Mithras is named as 'unconquered sun' (=sol invicto); which is a title found on many coins of the Roman period as a legion like the coins of Gallienus (253-268 A. D.), (RIC V 1 189 no. 658) Aurelianus (270-275 A. D.) (RIC V 1 309 no. 390) and Constantinus I (307-337 A. D.) (RIC VII 124 no. 33)

The fact that there is a ray crown besides Phrygian bonnet on the head of Mithras on the city coins in the Trabzon museum as depicted in Fig. no 19, 20, 21 and 22 implies that Mithras and Helios are equal. The horse protome near Mithras is an interesting description. By examining the horse protome in other examples, we can explain better the description of horse protome in Fig. no 14-18: Mithras is described as a cavalry man on a trotting horse in the descriptions of Fig. no 19-22. The same description was exactly copied in a sample belonging to Seleukia and Kalykadnos (Fig. no 12) (SNG *Levante* no. 721, 754, 757-758, 782, 784; Arslan 1999 pl. 149 no. 20. 21) and in another sample belonging to Septimius Severus (Fig. no 13) (Moushmov, 168) in Istros city in the west of the Black Sea.

The descriptions of Mithras as he is on horse are encountered in the eastern regions of Germany and the Roman Empire (Johnston 1992 310. See Merkelbach for the descriptions of Mithras on horse 1982 7-8; Hinnells 1971 2: 424- 445, Lev. 24; Vermaseren 1956 and 1960 1137, 1247, 1289 and 1292). As we have mentioned earlier, Mithras was popular among men and it had an encouraging character in 2nd and 3rd centuries AD. (Johnston 1992 310-311) Moreover, Mithras had a belligerent personality (Rostovtzeff 1930-1932 111) Thus, we can say that the Mithras description on horse is depicted to encourage the soldiers and to lead the Roman army to success.

Mithras cult had seven degrees named as Koraks, Kryphios, Stratioes, Leon, Perses, Helidromos and Pater. One of these, 'Stratios', is a military degree (Şahin 2001 108-109), which reminds us of 'Zeus Strait', a common cult in Pontus region. Zeus Stratios (= God of Armies) (Şahin 2001 179) is a cult founded by the Pontus kings in the Pontus region in Anatolia⁷. The fact that Zeus Stratios is a military cult and that the Stratios degree in Mithras cult is a military degree show that there was a close relationship between two cults. Such kind of a relationship is quite logical as far as the fact that Zeus Stratios cult was founded in the Pontus region by the Pontus kings who were very much interested in the Mithras cult is concerned.

When Amesia city coins of the Roman period are examined in relation with Zeus Stratios cult, it is realised that Zeus Stratios cult is depicted together with a tree figure and an altar figure in front of it (SNG *vAulPontus*, 43). And as far as the descriptions of Mithras on horse found on Trebizond city coins are concerned, it is observed that there is a tree on the reverse and an altar on obverse side reminiscent of the same figure as that on Amesia coins, which proves the relationship we have just mentioned iconographically⁸.

In the light of that information, the reason why Mithras is described as he is on horse or together with horse protome on the Trebizond city coins is revealed. Accordingly, the origin of Mithras cult dates back to the Pontus kings in the Pontus region. It was maintained by Roman emperors in the region, was combined with the Zeus Stratios, whose origin also dates back to the Pontus kings and which was maintained by the Roman, and described in the mentioned forms in order to encourage the soldiers as the "defender of armies".

⁷ In relation with the reason for the foundation of the cult, it was alleged that the Pontos Dynasty could have founded this cult in Amaseia, their new capital city, in honour of Zeus Stratios, who protected and led the armies of the related dynasty to success. Şahin 2001 179.

⁸ The only difference on Trebizond coins is that the horsed Mithras is between the tree and altar.

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Caption of the figures

Map 1: Black Sea Region and Trebizond.

Fig. no 1: Italy Capua Vetere: Mithtraeum.

Fig. no 2 Tauroctoni. Museo Nazionale Romana (Roma).

Fig.no 3: Zodiac. Ostia.

Fig. no 4: Tarsus, Trajan Decius Perseus , Apollon Lykeios and Demeter.

Fig. no 5: Gordianus III, coin of Tarsus.

Fig. no 6: Head of Perseus. Coin of Amisos.

Fig. no 7: Coin of Amastris.

Fig. no 8: Coin of Pharnaceia.

Fig. no 9: Pharnakes I , Star of Pontos and Mithridates.

Fig. no 10: Mithridates VI Eupator, Pegasos and star of Pontos.

Fig. no 11: Issues of Amisos, Sinope and Sinope and Komana.

Fig. no 12 : Seleukia ad Kalkykandos Gordianus III.

Fig. no 13. Istros , Septimimus Severus.

Fig. no14. Trebizond city coins of Roman period – Commodus.

Fig. no15 Trebizond city coins of Roman period – Commodus.

Fig. no16 Trebizond city coins of Roman period – Caracalla.

Fig. no17 Trebizond city coins of Roman period – Caracalla.

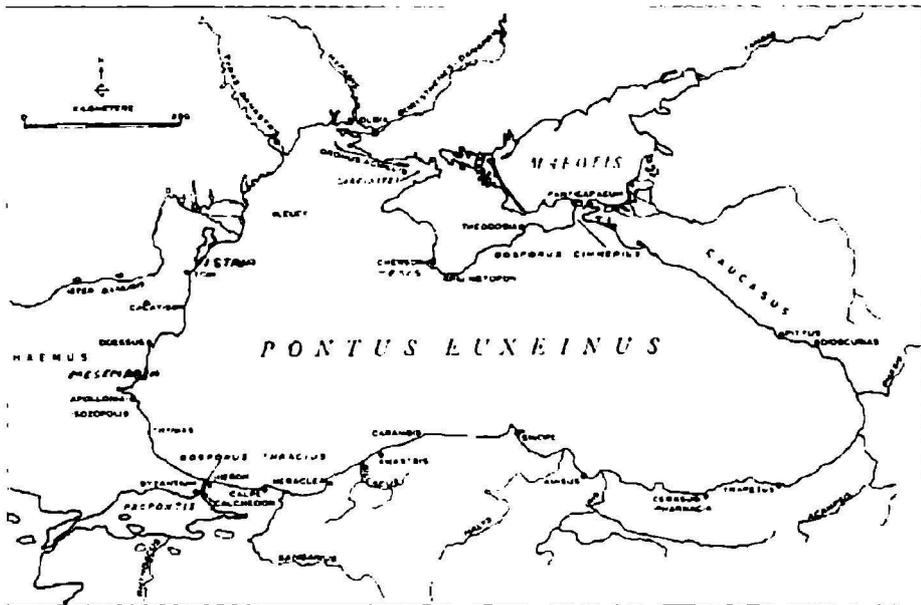
Fig. no18 Trebizond city coins of Roman period – Geta.

Fig. no19 Trebizond city coins of Roman period – Geta.

Fig. no 20 Trebizond city coins of Roman period – Severus Alexander.

Fig. no 21 Trebizond city coins of Roman period – Tranquilina.

Fig. no 22 Trebizond city coins of Roman period – Otacilia Severa.



Map 1: Black Sea Region and Trebizond

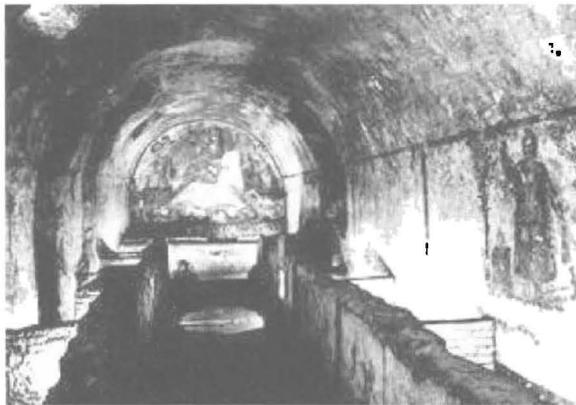


Fig. 1: Italy Capua Vetere : Mithraeum



Fig. 2 Tauroctoni. Museo Nazionale Romana (Roma)



Fig. 3: Zodiac. Ostia



Fig. 5: Gordianus III, coin of Tarsus



Fig. 4: Tarsus, Trajan Decius Perseus, Apollon Lykeios and Demeter



Fig. 6: Head of Perseus. Coin of Amisos



Fig. 7: Coin of Amastris



Fig. 8: Coin of Pharnaceia



Fig. 9: Pharnakes I, Star of Pontos and Mithridates



Fig. 10: Mithridates VI Eupator, Pegasus and star of Pontos



Amisos

Sinope



Sinope

Komana

Fig. 11



Fig. 12 : Seleukia ad Kalkykandos Gordianus III



Fig. 13. Istros , Septimimus Severus



Fig. 14: Trebizond city coins of Roman period – Commodus



Fig. 15: Trebizond city coins of Roman period – Commodus



Fig. 16: Trebizond city coins of Roman period – Caracalla



Fig. 17: Trebizond city coins of Roman period – Caracalla



Fig. 18: Trebizond city coins of Roman period – Geta



Fig. 19: Trebizond city coins of Roman period – Geta



Fig. 20: Trebizond city coins of Roman period – Severus Alexander



Fig. 21: Trebizond city coins of Roman period – Tranquilina



Fig. 22: Trebizond city coins of Roman period – Otacilia Severa