

ANCIENT WRITTEN SOURCES ABOUT BLACK SEA LEVEL CHANGES AND COASTLINE DYNAMICS: AN ATTEMPT AT AN OVERVIEW

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Introduction

The Black Sea is a genuine and unique child of nature. It may be argued that descriptions in ancient sources of the nature, economy, and ethnography of the northern coast of the Black Sea are quite reliable. The Greek colonization of this region was large in scale and demanded accurate geographical knowledge. In the ancient geographies, the northern Black Sea coast is represented by more extensive historical evidence than any other part of Western or Eastern Europe. To begin, it must be said that Greeks were skillful navigators. They knew the shores of Black Sea very well - recall the myth about the roaming of Odysseus in the land of the Cimmerians, ancient inhabitants of the Black Sea coast (Kun, 2005). For 6000 years - a short period of history - the Black Sea has been known by several names. It was the Axine (Herodotus, Strabo, Polybius etc.), Scythian (Herodotus, Strabo), Euxine, Russian (Russian chronicles and Arabian sources), Blue, and even the Holy Sea. At the time, the Black Sea was unfamiliar, strange, severe, and dangerous for the Hellenes.

Ancient Authors on the Northern Pontus

The Greek father of history - Herodotus - repeatedly proclaims the beauty of the Pontus (Herodotus, b. 4 (85)). His descriptions concerning Scythians and other tribes living on the shores of the Pontus are important; he asserts that these tribes were mainly nomads - wild and ignorant (ibid., b. 4 (46)). Herodotus was surprised to see among the inhabitants of Kolkhida dark-skinned people with curly hair. He was told that they were the descendants of Egyptians who had sailed a long time previously to the Caucasian coast of the Black Sea on a pharaonic ship. This does not prove that Egyptians had reached the Black Sea, as they did not leave any written evidence describing it. Herodotus was trying to write down as much as possible of what he had seen. He did not simply report what he was told, but he compared facts, dissociated reliable evidence from fiction, and, when he could, made direct measurements. Herodotus crossed the Black Sea along its length and breadth, making an effort to estimate its size (in length, he measured 11,000 stades, and in width, 3300 stades). Another ancient Greek author, Xenophon, in his famous "Anabasis," indicated that, for Greeks at the time, the Pontus was something mysterious, new, unexplored, and a bit terrifying (Xenophon, b. 6 (5)). In addition to Herodotus, Polybius made his own calculations regarding the size of the sea (22,000 stades in length and 8000 in width), and his estimate nearly doubled the size of the sea and its natural resources (Polybius, 28, b. 4, 38). Polybius also mentions that there were many useful resources in the Pontus: honey, beeswax, salt fish, good slaves, and cattle. Reports of the Greek historian Diodorus Siculus are quite interesting and valuable; Diodorus, as well as Strabo, informs us that the coast of Black Sea was inhabited by wild tribes of nomads, and for this reason, he asserts the sea was initially called "inhospitable." Diodorus Siculus also reports about natural catastrophes, as when the sea overflows its banks (due to a rise in the water level) and floods areas of dry land inhabited by people (Diodorus Siculus, b. 5). The famous geographer Strabo provides invaluable information about nature and life on the northern shores of the sea and the name of ancient Pontus (Strabo, b. 7 (6)). Strabo reports also that in Homeric times, the Pontic

Sea was presented as a second Ocean. It should be said that Strabo passed along information from his sources almost word for word, and did not subject it to considerable changes. In his descriptions, he tells about the development of fishing in the Black Sea. Overall, the northern Pontus possessed considerable natural resources - such as fields and pastures, and an abundance of fish. Strabo tells us about the existence of fish-towers used for fish observation in order to improve the catch, mainly tuna (ibid., b. 7, 4 (6)). Pliny the Elder in his "Natural History" gives us important information about how Pont Euxine appeared in his day (Pliny the Elder, b. 4, Ch. 24 (75), (76), (77)). Works of the Roman historian Tacitus also contain some information about Pont Euxine. Pomponius Mela in his main work "De Chorographia" describes the form of the Pontus, its shores, weather conditions, and existence of human populations (Pomponius Mela, 21, 1, 19). Recounting one of the legends, we see again that Pont Euxine and the people who were living there invoked in foreigners a fear on the one hand and, on the other hand, a foretaste of something new and mysterious, alluring due to its location and uncommonness (Tacitus, b. 7, Ch. 5 (20)). The Greek historian, Arrian, in his famous "Periplus Ponti Euxini," which was written in the form of a letter to the Emperor Adrian, provides, in addition to simply geographical and ethnographical data, political and military information as well as mythological excurses. The value of this Periplus is diminished by the fact that some information, especially about the western part of the Black Sea, was suspect with regard to its authenticity and acknowledged only with posterior insertions and additions. Arrian reports about the presence of harbours in the Black Sea (Arrian, 6 (4H)), but at the same time, he tells us about the dangers of Pont Euxine (ibid., 6 (7H)). Arrian also reports about fertile lands and woodlands of the Pontus. He writes about features of the water of the Black Sea in those times - it was fresher (ibid., 910 (8H)). Arrian tells us in detail about the island of Achilles, which he visited.

Conclusions

Reports from ancient Greek and Roman authors about the northern coast of the Black Sea and concrete information about the influence of the marine element, i.e., the Black Sea, on the life of people in those times supply us with data about the name, size, riches, conditions of existence, and changes in the Black Sea. It must be said that the sea's influence on people's lives was great. The Black Sea was like Mother and Father for humans. Based upon a number of sources, it is possible to say that a change of name for the sea, e.g., from Axine Pont, Euxine, Scythian etc., had an influence on the ambiguous character of this child of nature, its stormy changing mood, and the people inhabiting its shores. The strong-willed character of the Pontus is fixed in myths (in particular that concerning the Argonauts) as well as other legends (e.g., Crimean). We have been able to trace the changes in character of the Black Sea over time - its size, water level, how it appeared, and modifications of its coastline - and how these changes reflected upon people's lives. Regarding the climate of the northern Black Sea coast, it is possible to state that even the primordial name of the Sea - Axine - shows its changeable weather: gale strength winds (which also affected sea level), frequent rains, and sudden storms, which forced the inhabitants of the shores of the Sea, who were in most cases nomads, to adapt quickly to its changeable character. However, the North Pont was really a luxuriant place with plenty of fish, fields and pastures for farming and cattle breeding, and forests for shipbuilding that made for a viable interaction between people and the sea. According to the studied sources, it is possible to draw the conclusion that, to all navigators and travelers to the Northern Pontus, the Black Sea appeared to be a variously impressive and magnificent place for settlement!

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