

# Istorychni Zapysky Chornoho Morya

(An occasional series)

## Navigare necesse est, vivere non (necesse est)



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We are accustomed to think of our Ukrainian Black Sea history only from the time of the Varyahy and the Kozak raids on Constantinople. But the Black Sea has a history that reaches back to Biblical times, perhaps as far back as the Great Flood of Noah, according to archaeologists. Every square meter of Pontus (the lands around the Black sea) was fought over at least 100 times during the past 5,000 years, by successive waves of Asiatic barbarian hordes, Greeks,

Romans and other European hordes (Celts, Slavs, Varangians, etc.). The coastal waters, ports and trade routes of the Black Sea themselves became a source of perpetual conflict among the great naval powers of antiquity and modern times. The origin of the phrase « *navigare necesse est, vivere non* » has a long and noble history, emerging from a series of events in antiquity that were known to every school child who studied history before WWII. Today, several hundred yacht clubs, nautical societies and businesses and fraternal clubs, including “**Chornomorts’ki**” have this phrase as their guiding motto. What was the origin of this phrase and what was the historical context of its utterance? Who among the original Chornomorts’ki of the modern era adopted this phrase and when did it first appear in our literature and usage? The true origins of the phrase are quite interesting and, remarkably, have a direct link to a small but important slice of the always

turbulent history of the Black Sea.



At the age of 14, Mozart, composed an opera “*Mithradate, re di Ponto*” (Mithradates, King of Pontus). The fact that this story was well known in Europe in 1770 was not remarkable, as everyone who was educated at that time was well versed in

ancient Roman and Greek history. Mozart not only wrote the music – he had to write the story – the libretto – he also had to be sufficiently knowledgeable of the historical facts to create this tragic opera. There was also a European fascination with all things ‘oriental’, a term applied to Egypt and the Middle East and anything foreign, including Scythians and Sarmatia. In fact the Polish nobility (shliakhta) believed they were descended from the Sarmatians, promoted by the 15<sup>th</sup> century Polish historian, Jan Dlugosz. ‘Sarmatism’ became the dominant lifestyle, culture and ideology of the shliakhta in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth from the 16<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries of Polish enlightenment. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Sarmatian culture and ideals were further popularized by Henryk Sienkiewicz in his trilogy (*Ogniem i Mieczem, Potop, Pan Wolodyjowski*). Maps of that period showed the territories of Poland and Ukraine as ‘Sarmatia’. The Scythians, and the Sarmatians who overlapped them on the Pontic Steppes of Ukraine were allies of Mithradates against Rome.

**Mithdrates VI Eupator** (132-63 BC) was Rome’s most formidable adversary since Hannibal, 150 years earlier. He led his kingdom, called Pontus from 120-63 BC, and for most of that time was locked in a struggle against Rome by expanding his empire steadily westward which, at its height, included the steppes of modern Ukraine, from the Don to the Dneister R., most of modern Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Georgia – a very rich and important empire and trade route to the Mediterranean and the heart of the Roman empire. In effect, he controlled the ports of the Black Sea and the trade routes, and his capital was in Sinope, a home to a Hellenistic court, that was established by one of Alexander the Great’s generals as part of his conquests (the Seleucid empire).



Mithradates, himself began a rapid expansion of a fairly small empire in northern Turkey, which began to threaten Rome’s domination of the Mediterranean. In 115 BC, Mithradates, still a teenager, crossed the Black Sea to intervene in a conflict between the Hellenistic kingdom in Crimea (the “Bosporan Kingdom”) and its northern neighbors of the steppes, the Scythians. With this act, both Crimea and a large part of the northern coastal territories of modern Ukraine, including many of the centuries-old trading ports (Olbia, Chersonesus, Panticapeum) established by the Greeks in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries BC became part of his empire. Mithradates was able to achieve this rapid expansion because virtually from 90 BC till 30 BC, Rome was involved in great political instability of its own, including slave uprisings (Spartacus) and civil wars. The Romans were distracted, but not enough to turn their attention eastward. Mithradates even liberated Greece from Roman rule for a while, and allied himself with the notorious Cilician pirates of southern Turkey, the Ptolemaic dynasty in Egypt and even Spartacus himself. There were three “Mithradatic Wars”, just as there were three Punic Wars 100 years earlier, and despite the great turmoil and social unrest in Rome, the greatest generals of Rome were sent to confront Mithradates.

During the First War (89-85 BC), a young Julius Caesar was involved, as was the great general, Sulla, who later became Dictator of Rome. The First War ended in a peace treaty, with Mithradates ceding some of his territories. The second Mithradatic War (83-

82), was started by the Roman governor of one of the disputed territories, and ended in a bad defeat for the Romans. Mithradates recovered most of the territory he had lost during the first war. At the peak of his powers, he had over 400 ships in his navy, 50,000 cavalry and 250,000 infantry. His allies were Scythian princes around the Euxine (Black) and Maeotic (Azov) Seas. The Third Mithradatic War (73-63 BC) began, as many did, with the death of a Roman vassal king of Bithynia (a territory in southern Turkey) who bequeathed his kingdom to the Romans. Mithradates immediately disputed this transfer and launched an offensive to reclaim this territory. The Romans reacted swiftly and sent consul Lucullus, who had great success, initially driving Mithradates to his ally king Tigranes II of the Kingdom of Armenia. But he escaped, and in 67 BC, regrouped and drove Lucullus' deputies out of his domain.

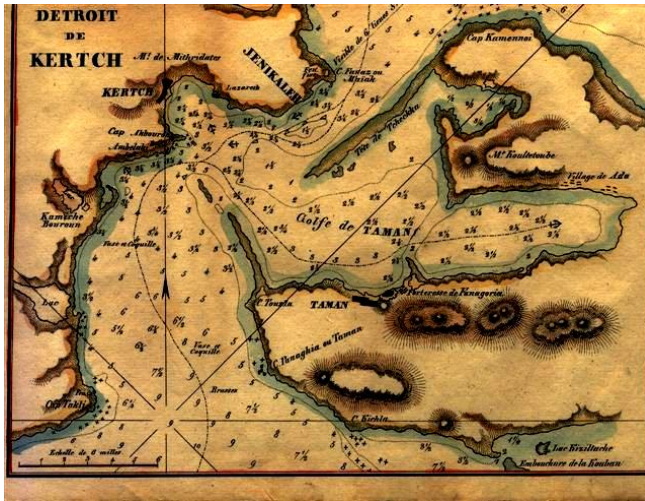
At the same time, Mithradates agitated his allies, the Cilician pirates, based in southern Turkey, to harass and disrupt the Roman trade routes in the Mediterranean. This caused shortages of grain supplies in Rome and prices rose, with a threat of famine. Rome sent their best commander, **Pompey**, to deal with the pirates, which he very effectively accomplished. He proved himself to be a very able naval commander in his pursuit of the Cilician pirates, though his training was exclusively in land warfare. Mithradates had employed these pirates as part of his campaign against Rome. According to Plutarch's account (*The Parallel Lives*, 75 AD), they were so successful, that they controlled over 400 towns around the Mediterranean, and boldly operated in the waters opposite Rome. Pompey was given a fleet of 500 vessels, which he distributed around the Mediterranean, dividing the coastline into 13 provinces, including the control of the Bosphorus. This was so the pirates would have no safe harbor to escape to when driven out of one area. He personally commanded the campaign in the waters off coastal Cilicia (southern Turkey), and destroyed their home bases.



A year later, in 66 BC, Pompey effectively finished the third war by driving Mithradates out of Asia Minor to his last stronghold on the Maeotic Sea, in **Panticapeum (Kerch)**, which was governed by Macheres, his son. Pompey pursued Mithradates through what is now Armenia and Georgia. One of Pompey's captains, led a fleet which sailed from the Bosphorus to meet Pompey in Colchis (Georgia). He would have pursued Mithradates to the Sea of Maeotis (Azov), but the 'Albanians' (what the Romans called the people of present day Azerbaijan), whom he had defeated earlier, revolted again. Pompey turned back, and his subsequent campaigns took him almost to the Hyrcanian Sea (Caspian). He decided not to pursue Mithradates, "*thinking it was easier to crush the king's forces when he made war than to seize his person when he was in flight, not willing to wear out his own strength in a vain pursuit*" (Plutarch, *Parallel Lives*). Meanwhile, Macheres did not want to rise up against the Romans, so he was murdered by his father, who went on to build an army of Scythian, Thracian and Sarmatian horsemen, with the intention of invading Rome's Thracian territories in the Balkans (Romania, Bulgaria). However, Pharnaces, the younger son of Mithradates, revolted against his father and assumed command of the forces. Having lost all, Mithradates committed suicide (63 BC) in the

ancient city of Panticapeum, today's Kerch. Pharnaces sent the decapitated body to Pompey, who gave Mithradates full military honors, and buried him in Sinope. Upon his triumphant return to Rome in 62 BC, Gnaeus Pompeius was given the title "Magnus", for having defeated both the pirates, giving back the Roman people the 'dominion of the sea' ("imperium maris"), and having finished off Mithradates and extended the empire almost to the Caspian Sea..

For centuries, Panticapeum (Kerch) was the capital of the Bosphoran Kingdom, an Iranian-Hellenic Kingdom that was home to the original Black Sea Greeks of the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup>



centuries BC, followed by the Thracians, Scythians and then the Sarmatians. Mount Mithradates looks over modern Kerch and the Azov Sea. But in Greek times, Panticapeum was located on the plateau that is Mount Mithradates. Half excavated ruins and foundations still cover a good part of the plateau. In the early years, Panticapeum was an outpost of Pericles' maritime empire, providing food for the mainland Greeks. With the civil wars in Greece and the ensuing Peloponnesian wars distracting

attention from the outposts, Thracian (modern Bulgaria) opportunists took control and set up a Bosphoran Kingdom in 432 BC. Successive waves of barbarians in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries AD (Goths and Huns) destroyed most of the cities along the Black sea coast. Kerch was only rebuilt in Byzantine times, on the slopes of Mt. Mithradates.

In September of 57 BC, Rome was suffering from one of its periodic severe famines, in part because of poor harvests and also continued pirate harassment of the trade routes, and the citizens of Rome were very rebellious. Rome turned to *Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus*, once again, mainly because he was so successful in his campaign against the Cilisian pirates. He was given extraordinary powers and authority over all grain production, transport and ports for a period of five years. He enlisted many of the best and brightest families and citizens of Rome at that time, including Cicero. He took control of production, sea routes, overland routes and the harbors. He personally sailed to Sardinia, Sicily and Africa to check on harvesting and shipments. Time was crucial – the stores of grain in Rome were dwindling rapidly, and people were desperate – the fate of the Republic was in his hands. When the first convoy was ready to set sail from Sicily to the port of Ostia (in Italy), a storm arose unexpectedly. The ship captains and commander of the flotilla refused to sail. But Pompey understood the gravity of the political and social conditions in Rome, and insisted that the fleet sail immediately. Time was precious. According to Plutarch, Pompey boarded the lead vessel, ordered the moorings untied, and yelled: "*navigare necesse est, vivere non est necesse*" (it is necessary to sail, living is not necessary). "By this exercise of zeal and courage attended by good fortune,

*he filled the sea with ships and the markets with grain, so that the excess of what he had provided sufficed also for foreign peoples, and there was an abundant overflow, as from a spring, for all” (Plutarch). Rome was, once again, saved by Pompey.*

But in the ensuing years, the political conditions in Rome were unstable and deteriorating rapidly. Rome was in crisis and the rabble were agitating for greater representation, and unscrupulous politicians were serving their own interests. Pompey was a reluctant politician, who was manipulated by others because of his fame and stature. Though he was Caesar’s long-time friend, he reluctantly agreed to oppose Caesar’s ambitions. After Caesar crossed the Rubicon, Pompey fled Rome, raised an army and navy of over 500 vessels and engaged Caesar in a series of battles. He lost a major battle and retreated to his ships and sailed to Egypt in 48 BC, hoping that Ptolemy XIII would receive him as an ally. Instead, a delegation sent by Ptolemy, boarded his trireme and assassinated Pompey. So tragically ended the lives of two great heroes and adversaries of a small part of history that was connected to the drama of the Black Sea.