The Northern Black Sea Coast in Classical Antiquity: New Discoveries

The northern Black Sea littoral was considered by both ancient and contemporary scholars to exist on the remotest peripheries of the Greek world. Yet it never degenerated into a backward or semibarbaric province of the great Hellenic civilization. On the contrary, its fate was closely intertwined with that of the whole ancient world. Its development passed through the same stages and gave birth to the same phenomena as the polis (city-states) of the Mediterranean and the Black seas. Nevertheless, this parallel development did not deprive the north Pontic city-states, as they were also called, of their unique self-expression, which was determined by ecological, ethnopolitical, and specific historical conditions. We believe that the immutable meaning of the region for general Greek history—and ancient history as a whole—is rooted in this harmonious, indissoluble interlinking of the general and the specific.

It is not difficult to find reasons for this dialectical harmony. The great fundamental moment that brought about Hellenism was its contact, from very first steps to its final breath, with a huge and varied world of outsiders. Hellenism civilized the northern shores of the Pontus Euxinus, along with its brotherhoods in Asia Minor and the Greek mainland, in Gaul and Spain, and in Libya and Egypt. This relationship, over the course of many centuries, determined the character of the northern Black Sea city-states as well as the surrounding areas. The second great moment, inherent to many regions of Greek colonization, consisted of access to vast natural resources, which, during the initially favorable ethnopolitical environment, led to a sharp rise in the local economy. The latter, in its turn, caused significant differentiation among the inhabitants of the city-states, at first in economic, and then in social and legal ways.

The particular character of the historical development of the Hellenistic state in the northern Black Sea area was influenced by the fact that, over the course of some five centuries, down to the Roman era, they were never subject to the strong despotsim of the ancient Near Eastern type. They were not part of Alexander the Great's empire, and after its collapse, were not integrated into any of the Hellenistic monarchies that developed from its ruins. This certainly does not mean that the Greeks who lived on the northern shore of the Black Sea remained autonomous during this entire period. Quite the opposite. Here, as in neighboring regions,