

THE PONTUS REGION FROM A NEW PERSPECTIVE RESEARCH ON THE EARLY MEDIEVAL CONTACTS OF SINOPE

GERGELY CSIKY¹

The early medieval trade of the Pontic is an archaeologically less explored subject, even though the region played a key role in the relations between Byzantium and the nomadic peoples living on the steppe north of the Pontic. Archaeological research on the Early Middle Ages on the southern, Anatolian coast has only begun recently. However, the assessment of the new archaeological evidence is essential to any study on the interaction between the steppean nomads and Byzantium. Discussed here will be the role played by Sinope in the light of a few select trade commodities and their Pontic context.

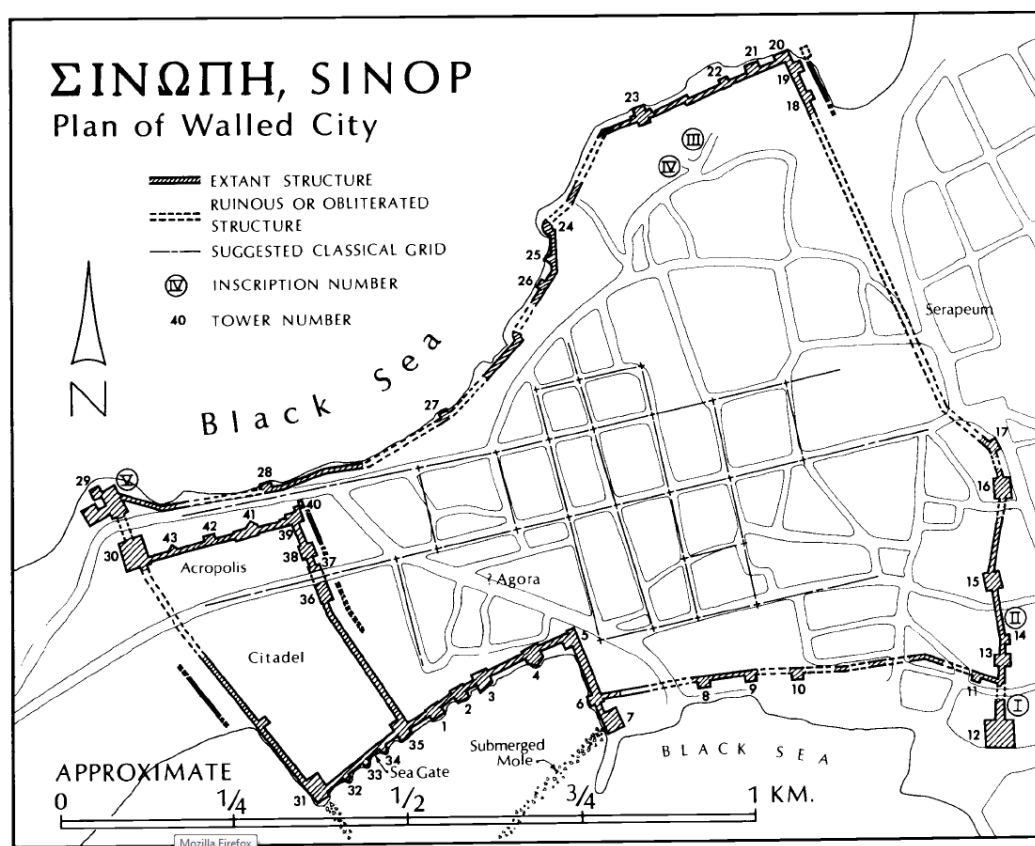


Figure 1: The layout and town walls of Sinope (after Bryer–Winfield 1985)

Hungarian archaeology traditionally regards the steppe region north of the Black Sea as the Pontic, a usage focusing on the hinterland of the sea. This viewpoint can be traced to the research perspective of Hungarian Migration period archaeology with an interest in the period's population movements and the successive waves of nomads arriving from the Eastern European steppe. However, the term Pontic is more generally used to denote the sea and its coast, and Pontic studies usually denote the research conducted in

¹ Research Centre for the Humanities, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 1014 Budapest, Úri u. 49. csiky.gergely@btk.mta.hu. Professional CV and bibliography: <http://kikicsoda.regesztet.org.hu/hu/node/1583>. Selection of downloadable papers: <http://mta.academia.edu/GergelyCsiky/Papers>



Figure 2: The ancient and medieval harbour of Sinope (marked with red)

these areas.² This research has a relevance for the archaeology of the Carpathian Basin too, because the archaeological record suggests that one of the major trade routes between Byzantium and the peoples of the Eastern European steppe probably led across the sea.

The Pontic littoral was dotted with towns ever since the colonies founded by the ancient Greeks arriving from Megara and Miletus.³ Most of these towns survived into the Early Middle Ages, except for the settlements on the north-eastern coastline. The greater part of the Pontic littoral – the Anatolian and southern Balkanic coast, as well as the Crimean Peninsula – was controlled by the Byzantine Empire. The eastern littoral was part of the Georgian princedoms (Lazica, Abasgia and Tao-Klardzheti) which followed Orthodox Christianity, while the region directly controlled by the nomads in the north only extended over a small territory.⁴ The coastal towns maintained lively trade relations with each other and with Constantinople, the imperial city. The town of Sinope (modern Sinop in Turkey) was the perhaps most important link between the northern and southern coast.

Sinope lies on a peninsula marking the northernmost point of Anatolia. The distance between the town and the southernmost point of the Crimea is no more than 250 km. Sinope lies on the boundary between the western and eastern basin of the Black Sea. Its prosperity can in part be attributed to its excellent location and the favourable sea currents: the waters of the Black Sea are determined by two currents circulating counter-clockwise which meet in the immediate vicinity of Sinope. The north to south current sweeps the ships from the Crimea right into Sinope's harbour. The town is one of the region's archaeologically relatively well researched locations. Its museum was founded in 1921 and the first excavations were begun in the 1950s by Ekrem Akurgal and Ludwig Budde.⁵ Several important excavations were conducted in the town and the province of Sinope (Sinope ili), during which Hellenistic and Late Antique amphora

² See, for example, Georges I. Bratianu: *La mer Noire des origines à la conquête Ottomane*. Societas Academia Dacoromana. Acta Historica IX. München 1969.; Fernand Braudel: *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*. Vol. I (London–New York: Fontana, 1972); Charles King: *The Black Sea: a History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

³ Gocha R. Tsetskhladze: *The Greek Colonisation of the Black Sea Area: Historical Interpretation of Archaeology* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1998).

⁴ For the region's Early Medieval history, see Anthony Bryer – David Winfield: *The Byzantine Monuments and Topography of the Pontos*. Dumbarton Oaks Studies XX (Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1985); Renate Pillinger – Andreas Pülz – Hermann Vetters: *Die Schwarzmeerküste in der Spätantike und im frühen Mittelalter* (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1992).

⁵ Ekrem Akurgal – Ludwig Budde: *Vorläufiger Bericht über die Ausgrabungen in Sinope* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basimevi, 1956).



Figure 3: Reconstruction of an amphora kiln in the Sinop Archaeological Museum

workshops were uncovered at Zeytinlik⁶ and Demirciköy,⁷ a Late Antique burial chamber was investigated at Sinop–Gelincik,⁸ and town houses with Late Antique mosaic floors were brought to light at Sinop–Meydankapı mahallesi.⁹ The church of a rural settlement was also excavated at Çiftlik.¹⁰ A research team led by Gülgün Köroğlu is currently investigating the Late Roman bath complex of Balatlar.¹¹ Two American research projects have contributed greatly to a better knowledge of the area’s history: four Late Antique merchant ships were discovered during deepwater sonar surveys, part of the “Black Sea Trade Project” directed by Robert Ballard,¹² while the participants of the “Sinop Regional Archaeological Project” (SRAP) led by Owen P. Doonan have conducted landscape archaeological research and field surveys on the Sinop Peninsula.¹³

I had the opportunity to participate in latter project during the 2011 and 2012 summer season: I joined the team during its surveys and partook in the pottery analysis. I gained access to the collection of the Sinop Archaeological Museum (Sinop Arkeoloji Müzesi) and I was also able to study the archaeological collections in the museums on the Turkish coast of the Pontic between Ereğlisi and Rize. A grant from the

⁶ Yvonne Garlan – İsmail Tatlıcan: Fouilles d’ateliers amphoriques à Nisiköy et à Zeytinlik (Sinop) en 1996 et 1997. *Anatolia Antiqua* 6 (1998), 407–422.

⁷ Dominique Kassab Tezgör: *Les fouilles et le matériel de l’atelier amphorique de Demirci près de Sinope: recueil de travaux*. *Varia Anatolica* 22 (Paris: Institut Français d’ Études Anatoliennes Georges Dumézil - Istanbul; and de Boccard, 2010).

⁸ Fuat Dereli: Sinop Gelincik Mezar odası, *Müze Çalışmaları ve Kurtarma Kazıları Sempozyumu* 11 (2001), 235–248.

⁹ Fuat Dereli: *Sinop. Kuzeyin Hırçın Güzeli*. *Sinope* (Sinop, 2010), 60–63.

¹⁰ Stephen Hill: The First Season of Rescue Excavation at Çiftlik (Sinop). *Anatolian Studies* 45 (1995), 219–231; Stephen Hill: Rescue Excavations at Çiftlik (Sinop). In: *Ancient Anatolia. Fifty Years’ Work by the British Institute of Archaeology at Ankara*, ed. R. Matthews (Ankara, 1999), 285–300.

¹¹ Gülgün Köroğlu: 2010 Yılı Sinop Balatlar Kilisesi Kazısı. *Kazı Sonuçları Toplantısı* 33/3. 23–28 Mayıs Malatya (Ankara: 2012), 65–76.

¹² Cheryl Ward: Four Ships of Late Antiquity in the Black Sea. *Ancient Civilisations from Scythia to Siberia* 16 (2010), 189–198, 541–542; Cheryl Ward – Robert Ballard: Deep-water Archaeological Survey in the Black Sea: 2000 Season. *The International Journal of Nautical Archaeology* 33/1 (2004), 2–13; Cheryl Ward – Rachel Horlings: The Remote Exploration and Archaeological Survey of Four Byzantine Ships in the Black Sea. In: *Archaeological Oceanography*, ed. Robert Ballard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008) 148–173.

¹³ Owen P. Doonan: *Sinop Landscapes. Exploring Connection in a Black Sea Hinterland* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, 2004).



Figure 4: Distribution of Günsenin's Type 1 amphora

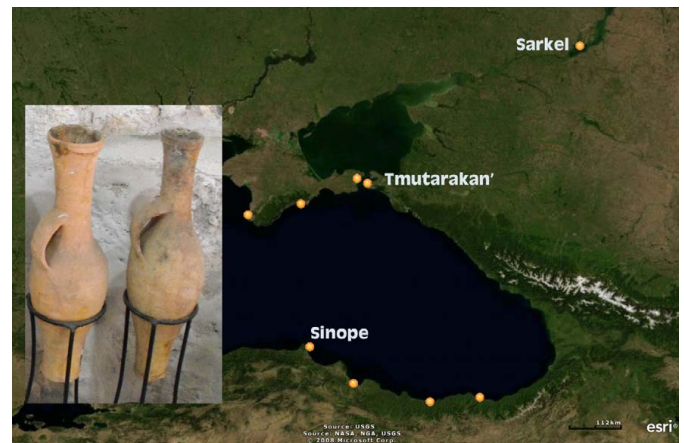


Figure 5: Distribution of Tmutarakany type amphoras

Hungarian Scientific Research Fund (OTKA) provided the funds necessary for a research project on the role of Sinope in Early Medieval economy and trade,¹⁴ calling for additional research in the Sinop museum.

The town of Sinope was engaged in various economic activities during the Late Antique and Early Medieval period. The town's broader area was renowned for its vine, fruit and olive cultivation since Antiquity, of which the latter played an especially important role in the town's unique position. A major amphora industry was based on the production of olive oil. The presence of amphoras, used for exporting wine and olive oil, is one of the most reliable indications of export. One amphora workshop, excavated by Dominique Kassab-Tezgör near Demirciköy on the coast revealed that the so-called Sinopean carrot amphoras were produced continuously between the 5th and the 7th centuries.¹⁵ The SRAP project also shed light on the agricultural background of amphora production: the remains of several extensive villa economies, often with oil presses in their vicinity, were identified during the field surveys in the valley of the Demirci river.¹⁶ The amphoras produced in Sinope reached even the remotest corner of the Black Sea, as well as towns such as Antioch (modern Antakya, Turkey) and Caesarea Maritima (Israel) in the eastern Mediterranean.¹⁷

Relations with the eastern Mediterranean were not one-sided. Late Roman amphoras of Type 1 (LR 1), produced in a workshop at Elaiussa Sebaste near Mersin, abound among the finds from the western Pontic coast up to Sinope. These amphoras were principally used during the 5th–7th centuries.¹⁸ The cargo of the ships whose wrecks were discovered at İnceburun contained both LR 1 amphoras and amphoras of the type manufactured in Sinope,¹⁹ as did the cargo of the ship that had sunk at Cape Plaka near Sudak on the southern side of the Crimean Peninsula.²⁰ In addition to imports from the eastern Mediterranean, various commodities arrived from the Aegean too, which played a similarly important role in the economy of Sinope and the western Pontic. The latter trade is indicated by finds of Late Roman amphoras of Type 2 (LR 2) used

¹⁴ Grant PD 100177, "Pontic trade in the Early Middle Ages – Research in a Byzantine harbour town – Sinópé/Sinop".

¹⁵ Dominique Kassab Tezgör: *Les fouilles et le matériel de l'atelier amphorique de Demirci près de Sinope: recueil de travaux*. *Varia Anatolica* 22 (Paris: Institut Français d' Études Anatoliennes Georges Dumézil - Istanbul; and de Boccard, 2010).

¹⁶ Owen P. Doonan: *Sinop Landscapes. Exploring Connection in a Black Sea Hinterland* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, 2004), 106–108.

¹⁷ Dominique Kassab Tezgör: Le réseau commercial des amphores sinopéennes entre les II^e–III^e s. et le VI^e s. de notre ère. In: *Patabs I. Production and Trade of Amphorae in the Black Sea. Actes de la Table Ronde internationale de Batoumi et Trabzon, 27–29 avril 2006*, éd. Dominique Kassab Tezgör – Nino Inaishvili. *Varia Anatolica* XXI (Istanbul, 2010), 167–173.

¹⁸ Olga Karagiorgou: Mapping Trade by the Amphora. In: *Byzantine Trade, 4th–12th Centuries*, ed. Marlia Mundell Mango. *Study for the Promotion of Byzantine Studies* 14 (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 49.

¹⁹ Cheryl Ward – Rachel Horlings: The Remote Exploration and Archaeological Survey of Four Byzantine Ships in the Black Sea. In: *Archaeological Oceanography*, ed. Robert Ballard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 165–166.

²⁰ Yana Morozova: Medieval Maritime Traffic and Amphorae Distribution along the Northern Coast of the Black Sea. In: *Actas des VIII Congreso Internacional de Cerámica Medieval en el Mediterráneo. Ciudad Real-Almagro del 27 de febrero al 3 de marzo de 2006*, eds Juan Zozaya et al. (Ciudad Real: Asociación española de arqueología medieval, 2009), 159–167.



Figure 6: Aerial view of Sinope

for transporting Chian wine, which is thus also an indirect indication of the consumption of wine.²¹ Interestingly enough, amphoras of this type have not been found in the eastern Pontic during the Late Antique period (5th–7th centuries), suggesting that this region was principally engaged in trade with Sinope and not with the Mediterranean or the Aegean.

Fine ceramic wares too reveal much about long-distance trade in the Late Antique period. Pontic Red Slip Ware, a variant of a late sigillata type known as Red Slip Ware, became popular in the region during the 4th and 5th centuries. Comprising mainly bowls and jugs, this ware was widely used along the Pontic littoral as shown by finds from the Crimean Peninsula, Abkhazia and the south-eastern coast, and it also appears in the Dobrudja and on the Bulgarian coast.²² The use and, probably, also the production of this ware ceased in the mid-5th century, when it was replaced by Phocian ware from the Aegean, whose use continued up to the 7th century.²³ The field survey data indicate that this change also occurred in Sinope.

The current evidence indicates that similarly to the Mediterranean, there was a radical shift in the region's economy after the 7th century. The 8th–9th centuries are regarded as the dark age of Anatolia – relics of this period are few in number and the least known. The ceramic sequence is patchy and thus, with the exception of a handful of better-known sites such as Istanbul-Saraçhane,²⁴ Amorium²⁵ and Sagalassos,²⁶ there are few finds from the 8th century. This is also true for Sinope: aside from a few sgraffito decorated glazed pottery fragments from the Middle Byzantine period (dating from the Komnenian Age, the 12th century or the

²¹ Olga Karagiorgou: Mapping Trade by the Amphora. In: *Byzantine Trade, 4th–12th Centuries*, ed. Mundell Mango, Marlia. Study for the Promotion of Byzantine Studies 14. (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 50.

²² Tat'jana M. Arsen'eva – Krzysztof Domżałski: Late Roman Red Slip Pottery from Tanais. *Eurasia Antiqua* 8 (2002), 415–491; Krzysztof Domżałski: Late Roman Pottery from Pompeiopolis. In: *Pompeiopolis I. Eine Zwischenbilanz aus der Metropole Paphlagoniens nach fünf Kampagnen (2006–2010)*, hrsg. Lâtife Summerer. Schriften des Zentrums für Archäologie und Kulturgeschichte des Schwarzmeerraumes 21. (Langenweißbach: Beier & Beran, 2011), 163–178.

²³ John W. Hayes: *Late Roman Pottery*. (London: The British School at Rome, 1972), 323–369. map 14–16; Krzysztof Domżałski: Late Roman Pottery from Pompeiopolis. In: *Pompeiopolis I. Eine Zwischenbilanz aus der Metropole Paphlagoniens nach fünf Kampagnen (2006–2010)*, hrsg. Summerer, Lâtife. Schriften des Zentrums für Archäologie und Kulturgeschichte des Schwarzmeerraumes 21. (Langenweißbach: Beier & Beran, 2011), 172–173; Ergün Laflı – Gülseren Kan Şahin: Terra sigillata and Red-Slipped Ware from Hadrianopolis in Southwestern Paphlagonia. *Anatolia Antiqua* 20 (2012), 75.

²⁴ John W. Hayes: *Excavations at Saraçhane in Istanbul: The Pottery II* (Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1992), 71–73.

²⁵ Christopher Lightfoot: Trade and Industry in Byzantine Anatolia: The Evidence from Amorium. *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 61 (2008), 269–286.

²⁶ Athanasios K. Vionis – Jeroen Poblome – Marc Waelkens: The Hidden Material Culture of the Dark Ages. Early Medieval Ceramics at Sagalassos (Turkey): New Evidence (ca. 650–800). *Anatolian Studies* 59 (2009), 147–165.

Seljuk Age in the 13th century), no substantial finds were collected from the period between the 7th century and the Ottoman period during the field surveys of the SRAP landscape archaeology project.

The amphoras recovered from the sea and the so-called Tmutarakany type jugs in various museum collections can dispel some of the darkness enshrouding the period. The identification of 8th–9th century amphoras will perhaps be possible after the assessment of the find material excavated in the Crimea and at Saraçhane. At present, the 10th and earlier 11th century ribbed amphoras with thick handles assigned to Type 1 by Nergis Günsenin can be identified with the greatest confidence.²⁷ These amphoras were produced in a workshop at Ganos near Rodostó/ Rhaedestos (modern Tekirdağ) on the Sea of Marmara.²⁸ This region is still famed for its wine production and it therefore seems likely that the amphoras were used for transporting wine. Amphoras of this type have even been found as far as the Khazar fort of Sarkel on the Don.²⁹ The distribution of this vessel type is a reflection of the trade relations between the Pontic and the Sea of Marmara.

The distribution of Tmutarakany type jugs is another indication of widespread trade contacts. This tall, spindle shaped jug with funnel neck and wide, flat handles was named after the site of Tmutarakany (called Tamatarkha in Khazar) on the Tamany Peninsula where it was first identified. Russian research has shown that these jugs were used from the 9th to the late 11th century.³⁰ The black residue in their interior was identified as the remains of petroleum derivatives suggesting the exploitation of the natural petroleum sources at Zikhia (on the north-eastern Pontic littoral near the Tamany Peninsula) mentioned by Constantine Porphyrogenitus in his *De Administrando Imperio* – petroleum was the raw material needed for producing Greek fire. Jugs of this type can be found in the collection of the Sinope museum, as well as in the collection of several other Turkish museums on the Pontic coast (e.g., Samsun, Giresun and Trabzon), yet another indication of the close ties between the northern and southern Pontic littoral.

The archaeological record thus suggests that the Pontic maintained close ties with the Sea of Marmara and the Aegean both in Late Antique times and during the Early Middle Ages, and that the trading network extended over the entire Pontic region. This network also played a role in early Hungarian history because according to Muslim sources, the ancient Hungarians played a role in the slave trade, one branch of the region's extensive trade.³¹ The lively trade of the 9th–10th centuries explains the presence of state customs officials in Sinope, whose activity is attested by their lead seals. These officials were known as *kommerkiarios* in the 9th century³² and as *abydikos komes* in the 10th century.³³ The detailed assessment of the finds in the Sinop Archaeological Museum will thus shed much needed light on the town's trade contacts.

²⁷ Nergis Günsenin: Recherches sur les amphores byzantines dans les musées turcs. In: *Recherches sur la céramique byzantine*, eds Déroche, V. – Spieser, J.-M. Bulletin de correspondance hellénique. Suppl. XVIII. (Athens, 1989), 267–276.

²⁸ Nergis Günsenin: Ganos. Centre de production d'amphores à l'époque byzantine. *Anatolia Antiqua* 2 (1993), 193–201.

²⁹ С. А. Плетнева: Керамика Саркела–Белой Вежи. В кн. *Труды Волго-Донской археологической экспедиции*. Том 2. Материалы и исследования по археологии СССР. 75. (Ленинград, 1959), 243–245.

³⁰ С. А. Плетнева: Керамика Саркела–Белой Вежи. В кн. *Труды Волго-Донской археологической экспедиции*. Том 2. Материалы и исследования по археологии СССР. 75. (Ленинград, 1959), 248–251. С. А. Плетнева: Таматарха – Тмутаракань. В кн. Макарова, Т. И. Плетнева, С. А. (ред.) *Крым, Северо-Восточное Причерноморье и Закавказье в эпоху средневековья IV–XIII века* (Москва: Наука, 2003), 175.

³¹ According to Gardizi and Ibn Rusta, the ancient Hungarians sold slaves to the Byzantines in the Crimea. Mihály Kmoskó: *Mohamedán irók a steppe népeiről. Földrajzi irodalom I/1*. Magyar Östörténeti Könyvtár (Budapest, 1997), 209.

³² *Prosopographie der mittelbyzantinischen Zeit*, hrsg.: Ralph-Johannes Lilie et al. (Berlin, 2000), 46. Kat. 4426.

³³ Hélène Ahrweiler: *Byzance et la mer. La marine de guerre, la politique et les institutions maritimes de Byzance aux VII^e–XV^e siècles*. Paris 1966, 57, 101. For a discussion of these officials, see Hélène Ahrweiler: *Fonctionnaires et bureaux maritimes à Byzance. Revue des études byzantines* 19 (1961), 246.

RECOMMENDED READING

BRYER, ANTHONY – WINFIELD, DAVID

The Byzantine Monuments and Topography of the Pontos. Dumbarton Oaks Studies XX. Washington D.C., 1985.

DOONAN, OWEN P.

Sinop Landscapes. Exploring Connection in a Black Sea Hinterland. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, 2004.

KING, CHARLES

The Black Sea: a History. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

PILLINGER, RENATE – PÜLZ, ANDREAS – VETTERS, HERMANN

Die Schwarzmeerküste in der Spätantike und im frühen Mittelalter. Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1992.