Adrienne Mayor

The Poison King: The Life and Legend of Mithradates, Rome’s Deadliest Enemy.


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Adrienne Mayor has shed welcome new light on the reign of Mithradates VI ‘Eupator’, king of Pontus, and one of Rome’s most defiant enemies during the Late Republic. Originally, Mithradates was just one Hellenistic king amongst many others in Asia Minor, ruling a small region south of the Black Sea littoral. In 87 BCE, at the height of his power, his realm incorporated nearly all of Asia Minor west of the Taurus range, most Aegean islands, Attica, Thrace, the Crimea and Georgia. The wars he intermittently embarked upon with the Roman Republic lasted decades and only ended with his suicide in 63 BCE. The fame of Mithradates was widespread throughout most of European history and he was a popular subject in cultural life in later eras: Racine wrote a tragic play about him, while the young Mozart composed an opera on his life. Mithradates’ fame has diminished slightly since the second half of the previous century, though Mayor’s account should easily bring him back to the limelight.

Mayor rightly points out in her introduction that ‘Mithradates’ incredible saga is a rollicking good story’ (11). She does a wonderful job in narrating the fascinating history and world of Mithradates, and the deep-felt sympathy for her subject is evident on every page. The reader is presented with a wealth of visual material, including beautiful contemporary coins and intriguing medieval manuscript illustrations. Mayor is a leading expert in the field of ancient toxicology and a study of Mithradates lends itself naturally to this topic. Every author should know when to ‘kill their darlings’, however, and at times her digressions on the king’s use of poison get quite repetitive.
A couple of methodological criticisms have to be made against Mayor's reconstruction of Mithradates' life and reign. Firstly, there is the case of source evaluation. The author desires to incorporate every text shedding light on the Pontic king, even when she is dealing with folklore or pure legend. While these texts can be valuable for reception studies, we should be cautious to incorporate them uncritically into the reconstruction of political events during Mithradates' lifetime. Speculation is always a risk in the field of ancient history, especially considering the paucity of sources for Mithradates' life. Mayor, however, goes as far as to conjecture an entire chapter about 'what could have happened during young Mithradates’ exile’, despite the complete absence of evidence for his activities in these years (73–96). A similar scenario occurs at the time of Mithradates’ suicide, when an alternative history presents what might have happened in the event that the king had survived the rebellion of his son Pharnaces (360–70). This sort of historical Spielerei is even more surprising considering the way in which Mayor sometimes treats crucial events to Mithradates’ rise to power, events which are far better documented, in a casual manner.¹

A serious criticism that should be raised about the book’s content is the sheer misrepresentation of Mithradates’ power and his ability to take on Rome. Mayor rightly stresses the unique character of Mithradates’ ‘Black Sea Empire’—something which would not occur again until the ascendancy of the Ottoman sultanate in the fifteenth century CE. She strongly emphasizes the wealth and numerically superior forces that the king of Pontus could deploy against the Republic, yet cannot disguise that Mithradates was consistently beaten by determined Roman commanders, such as Sulla, Lucullus, and Pompeius Magnus with vastly smaller, but highly disciplined legions. The initial success of the so-called Mithradatic Wars have to be understood in the light of the internal turmoil that was plaguing Rome. The first war took place in the aftermath of the bloody suppression of the Socii (91–88 BCE) and Mithradates profited from the civil war between Marius and Sulla, while his initial success during the third war has to be explained through the contemporary rebellions of Sertorius and Spartacus. Mayor has a tendency to consistently portray these mutual enemies

¹ The most notorious case is Mithradates’ incorporation of the Bosporan Kingdom around the Sea of Azov. Citizens of Pantikapaion set up a decree in honour of his general Diophantes after the latter’s successful campaigns in this region (IOSPE 1, 352). Until this day it has remained the most exhaustive contemporary text for studies of this region in the late second century BCE, and a source of various interpretations and dispute. Mayor deals with this episode in just a single paragraph (117).
of Rome as formal allies of Mithradates (188, 272, 278). Only Sertorius—to a certain extent—might be regarded as such, but there is no evidence for a formal alliance with Spartacus, while any such link with Rome’s Socii (174) should rather be interpreted as hostile senatorial propaganda to discredit the cause of the Socii.

The most obvious misrepresentation of Mithradates’ ability to tackle Rome is Mayor’s comparisons of him with Alexander the Great (82, 189). This is profoundly misconceived especially if one considers the case of Antiochos III (222–187 BCE). This Seleucid king came very close to restoring Alexander’s empire in the late third century, for which contemporaries titled him Μέγας. Antiochos ruled territories that dwarfed Mithradates’ and was able to draw upon far greater resources at a time when Rome’s dominion only extended to half of the Western Mediterranean. Yet his astounding defeats at Thermopylae (191 BCE) and Magnesia (190 BCE), clearly demonstrated that massive heterogeneous armies from the Graeco-Persian world were no match for Rome’s legions, and the conclusion of the Treaty of Apameia (188 BCE) would lead to the slow disintegration of the Seleucid Empire. Mithradates’ regional power was impressive but his insistence on war with Rome only accelerated the demise of independent Hellenistic rule in the Levant, and by the time he committed suicide most of Asia Minor, Cilicia, Syria and Judaea had been brought under the fold of the Res Publica.

*The Poison King* is a good starting point for the uninitiated into the enthralling life of Mithradates. Undergraduates will benefit from the extensive bibliography and notes, rich illustrations, clear narrative, and the excellent analysis of Mithradates’ legacy in medieval and early modern reception. An academic audience that wants to tackle the political history of the Pontic kingdom under Mithradates remains better served with Brian McGing’s account and the conference proceedings published by the Danish Centre for Black Sea Studies.²

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