

[Printable version](#)**History**
TODAY

Mithradates: Scourge of Rome

The legendary ruler of Pontus and creator of a formidable Black Sea empire was, until recently, one of the most celebrated figures of the Classical world, a hero of opera, drama and poetry. Adrienne Mayor, author of a new study of the 'Poison King', explains why.

In the autumn of 88 BC, a massacre of more than 80,000 unsuspecting civilians took place in Anatolia (western Turkey). The victims were Roman and Italian merchants, slavetraders and tax collectors, the deeply detested settlers in Rome's new province of Asia. The massacre, carried out by ordinary Anatolians, Greeks, Jews and other citizens of more than a dozen cities, wiped out the Roman presence in the region. It also precipitated an economic crisis in the Roman Republic, already beset by slave uprisings and escalating violence. Back in Italy, the reaction was one of horror and outrage. The Senate declared the perpetrator Rome's 'most wanted enemy' and dispatched the ruthless general Sulla on a search and destroy mission. The ensuing wars would drag on for decades, spanning two continents.



The mastermind of the massacre was King Mithradates VI Eupator Dionysus of Pontus (134- 63 BC), ruler of a small but

wealthy kingdom on the Black Sea. Recruiting ethnically diverse armies from far-flung lands, Mithradates had envisioned a powerful empire, a co-prosperity zone with rich natural resources, to rival Rome's expanding dominions.

His early policy towards Rome had been cautious: he probed for weakness, feinted and withdrew, constantly testing, negotiating, challenging. Biding his time, he carefully manipulated Manius Aquillius, the arrogant and ambitious Roman governor of Anatolia, into invading Pontus without senatorial authorisation. As the victim of Roman greed, Mithradates now felt justified in declaring war on the aggressor.

In the First Mithradatic War (89-85 BC) Mithradates' armies routed Aquillius and his reluctant coalition of client kings. Thousands of Roman settlers and their aristocratic supporters were already seeking refuge in temples and gathering in coastal cities, hoping to escape in the weeks before the massacre of 88 BC.

Following the massacre, Mithradates' armies marched into Greece. Hailed as a liberator, he annexed territories and won allies from Spain to the steppes of Central Asia. His tactics were diabolical and devastating. Scythed chariots with rotating blades mowed down armies; toxic honey placed along an invasion route destroyed opponents in their thousands; poisoned arrows dipped in snake venom cut down masses of legionaries. Stinging hornets and slaving bears attacked Roman sappers trapped in siege tunnels, while flaming naphtha immolated soldiers and their siege engines.

Yet, despite his savagery, Mithradates also pursued noble ideals: he freed thousands of slaves, pardoned prisoners of war, cancelled debts, granted broad citizenship rights and shared his royal treasure with his soldiers. Such contradictions were part of his legendary aura. As a young man, Mithradates (Old Persian for 'sent by Mithra') had received a classical Greek education and absorbed Zoroastrian ideals of free will, responsibility and honesty. He idolised Alexander the Great and dreamed of creating a new Greco-Persian empire. A complex leader of intelligence and ambition, a descendant of Darius I of Persia and Alexander's Macedonian aristocracy, Mithradates saw himself bridging East and West, the defender of Persian and Greek cultures against Roman barbarism. Followers revered him as the long-awaited saviour-king of the East, prophesied in ancient oracles. The Romans feared him as the eastern Hannibal.

Greek culture flourished again under Mithradates' rule and the Athenian democracy, suppressed by the Romans since 146 BC, revived for what would prove to be the last time. But Sulla's highly trained legions eventually overpowered Mithradates' forces in Greece in a series of brutal sieges and battles. Archaeologists recently unearthed the three marble victory monuments erected by Sulla, who looted Delphi's treasures and utterly destroyed Athens, slaughtering the citizens trapped in the city and executing the last democratically elected leader, the philosopher Aristion, on the sacred Acropolis. Prematurely declaring his mission accomplished, Sulla rushed back to Rome where civil war raged.

Sulla's hastily arranged, surprisingly lenient peace terms allowed Mithradates to recover and rebuild his armies. In 83 BC the Second Mithradatic War began when Licinius Murena, a Roman commander seeking glory, invaded Pontus without Senate approval. Mithradates, now recognised in Asia as 'King of Kings', crushed his forces.

In the peaceful decade that followed his victory, Mithradates built 70 new fortresses, amassed enormous armies, learned two dozen languages, pursued an obsessive interest in toxicology (earning him the name the 'Poison King') and patronised the arts

and sciences. His engineers built the first water-powered mill and created advanced siege technologies. The cryptic Antikythera Mechanism, arguably the world's first computer, may have been one of his prized possessions: it was discovered in a Roman shipwreck loaded with treasures looted near the end of the Mithradatic Wars.

He could count as his allies the rebel leaders of the Italian tribes: the gladiator-slave Spartacus; Sertorius, the rogue Roman senator heading the insurgency in Spain; Tigranes of Armenia, ruler of vast dominions from the Caspian to the Red Sea; powerful pirate admirals whose great fleets roamed the Mediterranean; exiled Roman commanders and rebel legionnaires; and nomad chiefs of regions ranging from the Danube to Central Asia.

In 75 BC, as Rome reeled from Sulla's savage proscriptions as well as slave revolts and wars in Gaul, Italy and Spain, the Third Mithradatic War broke out. The flashpoint was the death of Nicomedes, Rome's puppet king of Bithynia. The Romans produced his phony last will and testament to justify their renewed attempt to take over Asia Minor. The Senate sent Lucullus to finish the 'war on terror' that Sulla and Murena had failed to complete, but he was hobbled by undisciplined, mutinous legions; Roman soldiers had to rely on looting for pay, while Mithradates always paid his multitudes in gold.

Combined force

Lucullus was unnerved by Mithradates' ability to surge back after defeat and elude capture. Mithradates and his ally Tigranes combined forces and turned to guerrilla-style tactics after their crushing defeat by Lucullus's legions at Tigranocerta in 69 BC. The pair of kings melted away into the highlands of Armenia, luring Lucullus deeper into hostile lands beyond the Euphrates. Unable to engage face to face with his quarry, a humiliated Lucullus was recalled to Rome, charged with mishandling, and profiteering from, the war.

Mithradates seized the unexpected gift of a year to recruit yet another fresh army. Sweeping back into Pontus, he won a magnificent triumph against the occupying Roman legions left by Lucullus. Against the odds, the supposedly defeated king recovered his kingdom.

The following year, the great Roman commander Pompey cleared out the pirates infesting the Mediterranean and became intent on winning the victory in Asia that had eluded his predecessors. In 66 BC, in a surprise night attack, Pompey routed Mithradates' army, trapping them in a narrow ravine, inflicting terrible casualties. But the surprise was on Pompey, as the wily king escaped yet again, disappearing into pathless hills with his companion, the horsewoman Hypsicratea, and the remnants of his cavalry. Stopping only to gather up gold hidden in a secret treasure-house, Mithradates and his ragtag army led Pompey on a wild goose chase over mountainous terrain to Armenia and vanished into the wilderness of Colchis. Finally giving up the chase at the foot of the forbidding barrier of the Caucasus Mountains, Pompey assumed that Rome's most deadly foe was neutralised, doomed to an icy death. Seeking more conquests, Pompey set off for Jerusalem.

Meanwhile, the ever-resourceful Mithradates persevered, trekking over the high Caucasus. Arriving in the Crimea, in his Black Sea empire, he vowed to continue the war on Rome. Defiant to the end, Mithradates, now in his 70s, was planning an audacious land invasion of Italy over the Alps when he was betrayed by his son Pharnaces. Holed up in a castle in Kerch, facing certain death, Mithradates poisoned his harem and daughters. Then he drank poison hidden in the hilt of his dagger.

The 'Poison King' was a fitting moniker for Mithradates. His father had been murdered with poison; Mithradates himself foiled poison plots by his own mother and sister. Obsessed with making himself immune to all poisons, Mithradates devised a remarkable project, collecting deadly plant, mineral and animal substances and testing them on condemned criminals, his friends and himself. After hundreds of experiments, Mithradates concocted a daily cocktail of minute doses of poisons mixed with antidotes. Many believed that the mysterious 'mithridatium' was the reason for his celebrated vigour and longevity. After his death, versions of Mithradates' trademarked elixir were eagerly swallowed by Roman emperors, Chinese mandarins and European kings and queens, inspiring a flow of scientific treatises on the Poison King's long-lost original recipe, said to contain more than 50 ingredients.

The Romans developed a grudging admiration for their archenemy. Pompey buried Mithradates with honours in his ancestral mausoleum; Roman historians praised his courage and endurance. Pliny the Elder marvelled at his linguistic skills and scientific knowledge. Cicero called him the greatest king since Alexander, a tribute that would have thrilled Mithradates.

He was to enjoy a long and colourful afterlife in art, music and literature. Medieval artists illustrated scenes from his reign, portraying him as a noble 'Dark Knight' battling cruel Roman tyrants; Machiavelli called him a valiant hero; his reign fascinated Louis XIV. Immortalised in a tragedy by the great French playwright Racine, Mithradates and his doomed harem also inspired the 14-year-old Mozart to write his first opera, *Mitridate, re di Ponto*. Poets celebrated him, from Wordsworth and Emerson to Cavafy and, most famously, A.E.Housman: 'I tell the tale that I heard told. Mithridates, he died old.'

By the late 20th century, however, Mithradates' name and deeds began to fade from popular memory. As the historian of medicine George Corner remarked, of all the nations that 'came into mortal conflict with Rome, none is more utterly forgotten than the kingdom of Pontus. Her landmarks are uprooted, her temples fallen and of her mightiest ruler there remain but distorted legends'. Indeed, despite his extraordinary achievements and crucial role in the downfall of the Roman Republic, Mithradates has been inexplicably neglected by English-speaking historians for more than a century. Théodore Reinach's scholarly study, published in 1890 and still available only in French and German, is the great authority on Mithradates. A popular biography in English appeared in 1958 written by the historical novelist Alfred Duggan entitled *He Died Old*. Duggan's references to 'cringing Asiatics' are as old-fashioned as Reinach's earlier view of Mithradates as a prototypical Ottoman-style despot.



Forgotten figure

Why was the once renowned Mithradates the Great so forgotten? Should we blame Shakespeare for neglecting to immortalise his struggle against Rome? Or fault Marxists for favouring Spartacus, the gladiator-rebel of Thrace instead of the King of Pontus? It is not difficult to guess why memories of both Mithradates and Tigranes have been suppressed in Turkey, which still officially denies the 1915 Ottoman genocide of Armenians in Tigranes' old kingdom and the deportation of Greeks from Pontus,

Mithradates' philhellenic realm. Ironically, the Ottoman connection is also a major reason for Mithradates' neglect in the West. Reinach and other 19th- and early 20th-century European historians stereotyped Mithradates as a cruel, self-indulgent 'Oriental sultan', comparing him with decadent Ottoman potentates of their era. The image of Mithradates as the 'Asiatic' enemy of culture and civilisation originated in the 1850s with the greatest Roman historian of the 19th century, Theodor Mommsen. As recently as 1975, the German historian Hermann Bengtson embraced the stereotype, arguing that the massacre of 88 BC 'could only be conceived in the brain of an Asiatic barbarian'. This portrayal of Mithradates as ruthless, despotic and doomed to be cast aside by Rome's civilising power persists in recent novels and histories about the late Roman Republic: Hermann Bengtson's biographical account; Michael Curtis Ford's *Last King*; Colleen McCullough's *The Grass Crown*; and Tom Holland's *Rubicon*. Indeed, the sole aspect of Mithradates' reputation that remained vibrant in modern poetry and popular culture was his mastery of poisons.

Yet there are signs that Mithradates' star is rising. Recent European scholarship has examined specific aspects of Mithradates' reign, such as Brian McGing's *Foreign Policy of Mithridates* (1986). Luis Ballesteros Pastor analyses Rome's conflicts with an autonomous Hellenistic king in *Mitridates Eupator, rey del Ponto* (1996); and Attilio Mastrocinque's *Studi sulle guerre Mitridatiche* (1998) considers how ancient biases influenced modern historians. This year saw the appearance of an important study of the impact of Rome's Mithradatic Wars on civilian populations by Toni Naco del Hoyo and colleagues. Also in 2009, the Danish Centre for Black Sea Studies published a superb collection of scholarly papers edited by Jakob Munk Hojte, *Mithridates VI and the Pontic Kingdom*, followed by Philip Matyszak's popular treatment of the Mithradatic Wars.

As far back as the 1920s, the great Russian historian of antiquity Mikhail Rostovtzeff declared: 'Everyone remembers that Mithradates made his last stand' at Kerch in the Crimea. In recent years, several books and novels about 'Tsar Mitridate' have appeared in Russian and Georgian; Russian archaeologists are busily unearthing Mithradatic inscriptions and other artifacts; and in Kerch, now in Ukrainian Crimea, one can order a drink in Mithradates' Bar. In some lands once allied with or ruled by Mithradates he is admired as a leader who resisted the West; many Kurds and Armenians, for example, consider him a national hero, another reason for him to be ignored by Turkey. Yet even there, historians are beginning to take an interest in the first ruler to unite and defend the diverse peoples of Anatolia against foreign invaders. In 2007, the leading Turkish ancient historian Sencer Sahin compared Mithradates with the national hero Atatürk and another, Murat Arslan, published *Mithradates VI Eupator, Roma'nin Büyük Düşmanı* ('Rome's Great Enemy'), likening Mithradates' heroic defence of Anatolia against the Romans to Alexander the Great 'rescuing' Asia from the Persian Empire.

Mithradates' star rises as crises flare up in the strategic lands where he once ruled, fought and won allies, a list torn from today's headlines: Greece, Armenia, Turkey, Ukraine, Russia, Georgia, Chechnya, Azerbaijan, Syria, Kurdistan, Iraq, Iran. Last summer, the Caucasus burst onto the world stage when Russia invaded the former Soviet republic of Georgia (ancient Colchis), contesting control of South Ossetia and Abkhazia (where Mithradates recruited male and female nomad fighters). Some 2,000 years ago Mithradates shocked the Romans by crossing the Caucasus into Scythia, across the River Don and around the Sea of Azov to his castle in ancient Kerch. Mithradates' exact route has mystified ancient and modern historians, but close reading of the literary evidence, modern satellite maps and the knowledge of local mountaineers in Georgia led me to conclude that last summer's Russian invaders and Georgian refugees were streaming over the very same rugged mountain passes traversed by

Mithradates' fugitive army in 65 BC. He was accompanied on that journey by his last true love, Hypsicratea. A nomad female warrior of the Transcaucasus, her name translates as 'mountain strength'. She was so brave, wrote Plutarch, that Mithradates made her an honorary male, calling her by the masculine form of her name. Recently, Russian archaeologists discovered an inscription for her statue and were amazed to find that it confirms Plutarch's statement. Queen Hypsicratea's name is spelt in the masculine form: 'Hypsicrates'.

Nearly everything we know about Mithradates was written by his enemies, the ultimate victors. Biases were inevitable; the inheritors of Roman imperial culture looked through a Roman lens eastward, toward the expanding frontiers of the empire. On the other hand, it has often been noted that certain foes of the Romans ended up more famous than their conquerors. Rome's fascination with its most dangerous enemies and admiration for Mithradates' courage and ideals left a wealth of biographical material, scattered throughout many ancient texts: the king's moods, jokes, speeches and dreams were recorded. Among the chief sources are Justin's summary of a lost history by Pompeius Trogus; Appian's *Mithradatic Wars*; Dio Cassius's *History of Rome*; Strabo's *Geography*; Memnon's fragmentary history of Heraclea on the Black Sea; Cicero's speeches; and Plutarch's *Lives of Sulla, Lucullus and Pompey*. Some commentators, such as Cicero, were sharply critical of Rome's harsh imperialism and avarice, while Strabo, Plutarch and Trogus had family links to the Mithradatic Wars and treated some aspects of Mithradates' life favourably.

'The story of Rome and Mithradates is worth pondering today,' remarks Robert W. Merry, an expert on international economics, because 'Imperial expansion always breeds the likes of Mithradates in the far-flung reaches of the imperial domain.' Merry points out that it was Rome's decades of costly, inconclusive wars waged in the Near East to crush Mithradates and his followers that ushered in the 'internal chaos and violence' that destroyed the 400-year-old Roman Republic.

Modern Islamists often cast their resistance to Western superpowers in terms of resistance to 'Rum' or 'Rumieh', the Arabic name for ancient Rome. Abu Ayyub al-Masri, leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, vowed in 2006 that the Islamic jihad would destroy 'Rumieh'. The former Indian ambassador to Turkey and Azerbaijan, K. Gajendra Singh, sees in such language 'echoes of Mithradates' in relation to the Iraq War. The West, says Singh, has always 'demonised Mithradates VI of Pontus for standing up to Rome'. In Singh's view, the Western powers exploit the Middle East's oil resources 'with the connivance of client rulers', just as the Roman Empire 'ruthlessly exploited and taxed their subjects in Asia'.

Other parallels between today's world crises and the Mithradatic Wars have arisen in the past two years. The resurgence of piracy on the high seas, as Somalian pirates capture international shipping for ransom, recalls Rome's troubles with the powerful pirate fleets of the first century BC, allies of Mithradates. Then as now, piracy thrives when authority is disputed and superpowers are distracted. Rome, contending with civil uprisings and provincial revolts as well as Mithradates' challenges, was preyed upon by the pirates infesting the Black Sea and Mediterranean. In a recent lecture for the Oxford Roman Economy Project, the economic historian Philip Kay pointed out notable similarities between the recent global economic collapse and the financial catastrophe that ensued in Rome after Mithradates invaded Provincia Asia and wiped out the Roman presence there in 88 BC. Cicero explained the disastrous cascade effect: 'When so many thousands of individual Roman investors lost large fortunes and foreign property, credit collapsed at Rome, because repayments were interrupted, and all the individual losses

inevitably cast even greater numbers of investors into ruin.'

Like the paradoxical toxins and antidotes he sought to control, Mithradates was a double-edged sword: he corroded the predatory Roman Republic and defended Rome's intended prey. In the end, of course, Rome emerged victorious. As the last independent monarch of the Hellenistic era left standing, Mithradates was fighting against an unstoppable tide. Yet Mithradates helped to shape Rome's destiny. He proved to the world that the empire was not invincible and forced the Romans to conquer, occupy and administer the Middle East, which became a perpetual troublespot for them. The long pursuit of this formidable enemy in the last days of the Republic culminated in the death of Roman ideals of freedom and honour and the birth of a tyrannical empire. Under Mithradates, Greek democracy rose again, only to be savagely crushed. Yet its brief reappearance set a model for democratic opposition to tyranny. Mithradates helped define for the ancients the limits of violent resistance and prepared the way for new methods of grappling with tyranny in the transition from Republic to Empire, from BC to AD.

Adrienne Mayor is a visiting scholar in classics and the history of science at Stanford University. Her latest book, *The Poison King: The Life and Legend of Mithradates, Rome's Deadliest Enemy* (Princeton, 2009) has been nominated for a National Book Award.

Further Reading Alfred Duggan, *He Died Old: Mithradates Eupator, King of Pontus* (Faber, 1958); Michael Curtis Ford, *The Last King* (Minotaur, 2008); Jakob Munk Hojte, *Mithradates VI and the Pontic Kingdom* (Aarhus University Press, 2009); Tom Holland, *Rubicon: The Last Years of the Roman Republic* (Abacus, 2004); Philip Matyszak, *Mithridates the Great: Rome's Indomitable Enemy* (Pen and Sword, 2008); Brian C. McGing, *The Foreign Policy of Mithridates VI Eupator, King of Pontus* (Brill, 1986).

For further articles on this subject, visit: www.historytoday.com/ancient

