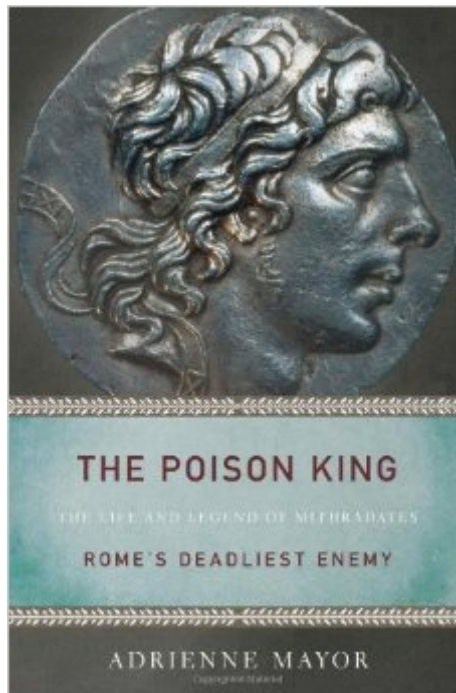


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The Poison King: The Life And Legend Of Mithradates, Rome's Deadliest Enemy



Synopsis

Machiavelli praised his military genius. European royalty sought out his secret elixir against poison. His life inspired Mozart's first opera, while for centuries poets and playwrights recited bloody, romantic tales of his victories, defeats, intrigues, concubines, and mysterious death. But until now no modern historian has recounted the full story of Mithradates, the ruthless king and visionary rebel who challenged the power of Rome in the first century BC. In this richly illustrated book--the first biography of Mithradates in fifty years--Adrienne Mayor combines a storyteller's gifts with the most recent archaeological and scientific discoveries to tell the tale of Mithradates as it has never been told before. The Poison King describes a life brimming with spectacle and excitement. Claiming Alexander the Great and Darius of Persia as ancestors, Mithradates inherited a wealthy Black Sea kingdom at age fourteen after his mother poisoned his father. He fled into exile and returned in triumph to become a ruler of superb intelligence and fierce ambition. Hailed as a savior by his followers and feared as a second Hannibal by his enemies, he envisioned a grand Eastern empire to rival Rome. After massacring eighty thousand Roman citizens in 88 BC, he seized Greece and modern-day Turkey. Fighting some of the most spectacular battles in ancient history, he dragged Rome into a long round of wars and threatened to invade Italy itself. His uncanny ability to elude capture and surge back after devastating losses unnerved the Romans, while his mastery of poisons allowed him to foil assassination attempts and eliminate rivals. The Poison King is a gripping account of one of Rome's most relentless but least understood foes.

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Customer Reviews

This book combines two qualities that I find essential in a history work: It is extensively, indeed exhaustively researched, and it is eminently readable and accessible. I have been primarily a student of Roman/Byzantine history, while naturally developing a fair amount of knowledge about the history of the Gauls/Franks, Persians, Carthaginians, and Persians, among others. I know Hannibal because I know Fabian (and Scipio), Vercengetorix because I know Caesar, and so on, but I knew little about Mithradates prior to reading this work. I was particularly interested to learn that Mithradates was a historical character of considerable fame throughout the middle ages and renaissance. While I have of course previously read of the campaigns of Sulla and Pompey in Asia, this had always been from the Roman point of view, with little effort to provide insight into Mithradates, their primary opponent, and his realm. Apparently the old boy has fallen out of fashion for a hundred years or so. As I read "The Poison King", I found myself constantly amazed at the wealth, activity, cultures, and leadership in Pontus. While many of the detailed records of his life are lost or colored by their Roman filter, Mithradates remains a compelling and fascinating character based upon what we know and may reasonably infer or surmise. It is surely not overstatement to say that he was Rome's most feared enemy for fifty years. If you are interested in the Eastern theater of Rome's empire prior to the fall of the Republic, I think you have to regard this as a must-read. Regarding some of the negative reviews: I almost have believe we didn't read the same book.

I admit that I had high hopes for this book. It has garnered significant and compelling praise. The author has a good reputation. The book is well written and interesting to read, especially on ancient warfare and the use of poison. The introduction is convincing, what with some smart comments on historiography and historical methodology. There are some less convincing parallels drawn between that age and our own but it's not too annoying. (Superpower gets drawn into guerrilla warfare against insurgents in far-off lands with inhospitable terrain. You get the picture.) Let me begin by throwing out a couple of hasty questions: Was Mithradates really Rome's deadliest enemy? Were the seeds of Rome's decline -- such as it was -- really sown as a result of changes to the military structure of the army, in the conflicts in Anatolia, etc., against Mithradates? These questions serve to give a sense of some of the other problems. But the biggest problem with the book is the naive and persistent veneration of Mithradates: behaviour that is condemned in others (generally Rome, but also Mithradates' family and local enemies, like Nicomedes) is celebrated as canny and shrewd when done by Mithradates. These include piracy, exploitation, poisoning, incest, infanticide, fratricide, betrayal, assassination, and general colonization etc. If you think I'm exaggerating about

the veneration of M., consider that when Rome arrives, it exploits ruthlessly, but M. is described as inventing "co-prosperity" (!) plans (p. 119). When Major writes of Mithradates, she writes (in anodyne language intended to illustrate his benign benevolence) of those who (foolishly) decline to join his co-prosperity plan; whereas when she writes of Rome, she speaks of brutal oppression and exploitation.

Literature on ancient Rome can overtly or subtly applaud the level of civilization it provided for its people. Little note is made that the beneficiaries were a small percentage of the population. The beneficiary proportion is smaller still when the people of conquered lands are counted. Rome's enemies skirmished and revolted, but Rome's strong aggressive armies fended them all off for centuries. Adrienne Mayor provides an antidote (pun intended) to the genuine, and highly touted, accomplishments of Rome. Within the context of Mithradates' life you can see the point of view of Rome's enemies, slaves and clients. You see how they mocked Rome's cherished myth of being founded by orphans suckled by wolves. You see sympathy for Jugurtha and other royals humiliated by Rome's triumphs. You see resentment of a former middle class reduced to paupers by taxes and tributes. Feelings obviously ran deep such that thousands of coordinated guerilla attacks on Black Sea based Romans could kill perhaps 80,000 in one day in 88 BCE. This book describes not only the complex character of Mithradates but also the complex world in which he lived. Mayor takes you through Mithradates life as a wandering youth, to his study and use of poisons, to his benign (for its times) rule, to his raising great armies, to his murder of relatives, to his marriages and mistresses (losing track of the children) to the death that is recorded for him. She also poses some alternative history, worth considering, of later life for Mithradates and his warrior wife Hypsicratea. At the end there is a discussion entitled "Hero or Deviant?" with an outline of how Mithradates meets and doesn't meet the criteria for each. I've long wondered psychology as an evolutionary trait.

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