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## A Review of the Poison King: The Life and Legend of Mithradates, Rome's Deadliest Enemy


Morteza Arabzadeh Sarbanani<sup>1</sup> 

**Poison King: The Life and Legend of Mithradates, Rome's Deadliest Enemy**, Adrienne Mayor, Princeton University Press, 2011, 480 pp, ISBN: 9780691150260.

Adrienne Mayor's *The Poison King* is a fascinating biography of Mithradates Eupator Dionysus, one of the most controversial monarchs of ancient history who has been especially neglected by scholars of Iranian history. This biography, like any other about ancient heroes, is full of tales, legends, stories, and historical narratives and its crafty author knows how to distinguish between fact and fiction. The book contains 15 chapters, in which, other than the first, the remaining chapters are arranged based on Mithradates' life, from his birth to his death. The author has tried to present a new picture of Mithradates, an image different from that of pro-Roman sources, and highlights novel aspects of Mithradates' life and rule. But this is not a book merely about one personae, it also provides valuable information about the influence of Persian culture on Pontus and Anatolia and the relationship of this land with the Scythians, Armenia and Rome. The paper tries to focus on different chapters of the book to analyze how much the author of the book was successful in depicting Mithradates' rise and fall.

The author introduces old sources, new research, and his own historical method in introduction. Under the sub-section *Historical Methods*, she compares the work of a historian with a detective and points out the importance of guesswork in historical studies. As the reader realizes throughout the book, many aspects of Mithradates' life are unknown, and Mayor uses "the guesswork approach" to fill in these gaps. Some may criticize this method and emphasize that admitting to ignorance is better than speculating, but this method adds to the charm of the book, and wherever the author uses expressions such as "might have", "could have" and "perhaps", remind the reader that she has entered the realm of guesswork.

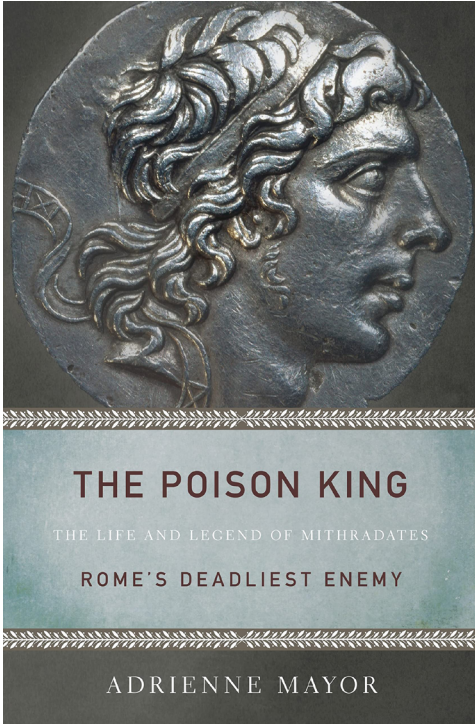
**Chapter 1: Kill Them All, and Let the Gods Sort Them Out.** The first chapter focuses on the darkest part of Mithradates' life: the great massacre of Italians in Anatolia. This event is considered a turning point in Mithradates' life and rule because its bit-

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**A Review of the Poison King: The Life and Legend of Mithradates, Rome's Deadliest Enemy, Adrienne Mayor, Princeton University Press, 2011, 480 pp, ISBN: 9780691150260.**

ter memory was never erased from the minds of the Romans. But Mayor looks at it from a different perspective. While accepting the brutality of Mithradates and his supporters in killing the Romans, following Susan E. Alcock's suggestion (2007, p. 13), she tries to root out the reasons for the Anatolians' deep hatred of the Romans. In the same way, it refers to the heavy taxes the Romans imposed on their subjects and also their cruel slavery system, which made many Anatolians dislike them. Although Mayor hints that this incident was unique in antiquity in terms of geographical extent and the number of dead people, it would have been better to refer to similar events in the same era. Among them are Herodotus' account of how Darius I came to power and killed the Magi on a certain day (Herodotus, III, 79), or the story of the book of Esther, according to which Haman, Ahasuerus' minister, orders to massacre all the Jews throughout the Persian Empire on a certain day (Esther, 3, 13). Such incidents show that Mithradates probably had models in planning such massacre, especially Herodotus' account of the slaughter of the Magi is

important because Mithradates probably was aware of this narrative.

*Chapter 2: A Savior is Born in a Castle by the Sea.* This chapter focuses on the legends and stories surrounding Mithradates' birth. Mayor studies the account of the appearance of the comet at the time of Mithradates' birth, which for a long time, many modern historians like Theodore Reinach (1890) had considered just fake and propaganda. But by using Chinese sources and Ramsey's research (1990: 197-253), Mayor proves that Mithradates' birth probably coincided with the comet's appearance. Using astrological information, she manages to estimate Mithradates' year of birth, a date that is also consistent with some Roman sources. But the most important discussion that Mayor raises in this chapter is dealing with the mystery of the engraving of comets on some of Mithradates' coins, a phenomenon that was considered an ominous sign in the Greco-Roman world. Mayor correctly points to the positive background of this phenomenon in eastern cultures, especially Persia, and by examining the star coins of Tigranes in Armenia, she concludes that for Mithradates and his people, the comet was a sign of promise. This chapter also deals with Mithradates' paternal and

maternal ancestors, showing that there is reliable evidence that Mithradates was related to the Achaemenians on his father's side and Alexander the Great on his mother's side. Another important issue discussed in this chapter is the compatibility of Mithradates' life with the lives of the heroes of the ancient world such as Cyrus the Great and Alexander. Accordingly, at the end of the book, in Appendix One, using Otto Rank's research (1990), Mayor hints at the similarities between Mithradates' life and other heroes of antiquity. At first glance, these parallels make us think of them as stories and legends, but throughout the book, Mayor shows that important historical evidence supports the reality of some of them.

*Chapter 3: Education of a Young Hero.* This chapter deals with the first years of Mithradates' life. A period when there is minimum historical information about it and the author has turned to guesswork to a large extent. The cultural characteristics of Pontus are also discussed in this section, especially the influence of Iranian culture on it. The study of the Iranian culture in Pontus is significant because most researchers think that the kings of Pontus were completely Hellenized. It is precisely for this reason that perhaps the researchers of Iranian history have paid less attention to Pontus, but throughout the book, Mayor reminds us many times that many of Mithradates' customs and behaviors, especially the issues related to his religion, are connected with the Iranian culture and religions (Zoroastrianism and Mithraism). The author correctly points out the clash of Iranian and Greek cultures in Pontus, Mithradates' homeland. Iranian and Greek components are both apparent in Mithradates' rule, and his mastery of the Greek language allowed him to access the works of historians such as Herodotus and Xenophon on the history of the Achaemenians. Mithradates probably knew more about the history of the Achaemenians than the Parthians, who at the same time claimed the heritage of the former Persian Empire. Therefore, the idea that Mithradates was a Greek king (Raditsa, 2006: 111; Wiesehöfer, 2014: 183-184) with Persian blood is a huge mistake. This fact has led Mayor to propose that Mithradates sought to create an Iranian-Greek empire against Rome. She even goes so far as to call this dream of Mithradates an imitation of Alexander. Alexander the Great was undoubtedly one of Mithradates' heroic models, but Mayor sometimes exaggerates in this regard. For example, the fact that Mithradates always carried a weapon with himself does not necessarily indicate his imitation of Alexander! Rather, like Alexander, he probably did it for security reasons. Also, it seems doubtful that Alexander sought to combine eastern and western cultures, especially Persian and Greek. Indeed, after the conquest of Persia, Alexander adopted Persian manners, traditions, and even Persian clothes and encouraged himself and his generals to marry the daughters of Iranian nobles, but this may be a sign of Alexander's Persification, showing that he was influenced by a superior culture. Most importantly, long before Alexander and during the Achaemenian period, the integration of cultures had occurred to a large extent. The empire that Mithradates was trying to build consisted of different ethnicities like the Persian Empire. If the Persians, Medes, Elamites, and Babylonians played a vital role in the Achaemenian Empire, the Persians, Greeks, native Anatolians, and Scythians played such a role in Mithradates' empire. Therefore, Mithradates' model in creating a worldwide empire may have been the Persian Empire.

In this chapter, the history of Pontus and Anatolia and anti-Roman uprisings such as Aristonicus are also discussed a little. Unfortunately, almost nothing is said about the history of Pontus and Anatolia during the Achaemenian and Seleucid periods, perhaps because the author considered it unnecessary or redundant, but presenting a picture of the situation in Anatolia in previous periods, especially the history of the Mithradatic dynasty, could help the readers to understand Mithradates' goals, ideas, and leadership.

**Chapter 4: *The Lost Boys.*** The fourth chapter deals with Mithradates' mysterious escape from Sinope, the capital of Pontus. An event that the Mayor attributes to Mithradates' fear of being killed by his opponents, including his mother. No historical source has explained what Mithradates was doing during his four or five-year absence from Sinope. For this reason, Mayor tries to guess the route of Mithradates' travels by taking into account the geography and history of Pontus and takes the reader on a short tour of Pontus at that time. One of the positive features of the book is a detailed discussion of the geography and nature of Pontus, Mithradates' homeland.

**Chapter 5: *Return of the King.*** In this chapter, the advent of Mithradates' reign is explained. The author not only describes Mithradates' first political measures, but also his demeanor with his mother and younger brother, as well as his marriage with his sister Laodicea and his relationship with his other sisters. One of the most noteworthy positive characteristics of the book is the detailed study of Mithradates' private life and his relationship with his friends and associates. Especially, the study of Mithradates' harem indicates that he was mainly an eastern ruler similar to the Achaemenians. For instance, the names of Mithradates' sons show more than anything his dedication to the customs and traditions of the Achaemenians. Unfortunately, Mayor does not address the names of Mithradates' children as much as she should. For example, if Mithradates was deeply moved by Alexander, why didn't he name any of his sons Alexander? Or if Mithradates loved Greece so much, why one of his children was named Xerxes, a king whom the Greeks hated because he invaded Greece? In the ancient world, there were many reasons for choosing children's names, and especially in aristocratic families, names were chosen with special care and for certain reasons.

**Chapter 6: *Storm Clouds.*** This chapter deals mainly with the cause of the ignition of the Mithradatic wars and how the interventions of Pontus and Rome in Bithynia and Cappadocia led to their direct conflict. Mayor also deals with Tigranes, King of Armenia, Mithradates' son-in-law, and most notable ally. Dealing with the history and geography of Armenia is also one of the positive features of the book that can be seen in all of the chapters. It is vital to know the status of Armenia and the policies of Tigranes due to its connection with Pontus. In addition to Armenia, the events of Rome at the same time are also considered, and the author from time-to-time deals with Rome and its connection with Mithradates' policies and his negotiations with the Roman Republic. Mithradates' negotiations with Rome are particularly important and several pages of the book are dedicated to this issue.

**Chapter 7: *Victory.*** This chapter deals with Mithradates' initial victories in the first Mithradatic War. From this chapter onwards, the war with Rome is always the main subject of the book, but Mayor does not neglect other topics such as Mithra-

dates' romantic relationships and personal life. Regarding Mithradates' foreign policy, the author deals in detail with his relationship with the Scythians, Armenia, and the Roman rebels, but she does not say much about his relationship with the Parthians, the main power of the Iranian plateau at that time. The Parthians are important because they were considered the heirs of the Achaemenians and were a mighty power. Why didn't the Parthians eventually unite with Pontus against Rome? Unfortunately, the author does not answer this question.

**Chapter 8: Terror.** The eighth chapter, continuing the previous chapter, deals with the massacre of the Romans throughout Asia Minor and the punishment and execution of the Romans. This chapter also highlights Mithradates' envoy to Athens, Athenion, who was supposed to play a major role in Mithradates' goals in Greece.

**Chapter 9: Battle for Greece.** As the title of the chapter suggests, its subject is Mithradates' campaign to the mainland Greece. Relying on Mithradates' interest in Greece as well as his popularity among the Greeks, Mayor presents him as a liberator, an opinion directly opposed to the pro-Roman sources that consider him a tyrant. Of course, a large number of Greeks were supporters of Mithradates and his cause, but a large number of them also cooperated with Rome, and finally, as mentioned many times throughout the book, the treachery of some of these Greeks caused Mithradates' heavy defeats. The author also does not deal as much with Athenion's reign of terror in Athens and the reasons why many Anatolian cities finally joined Rome.

**Chapter 10: Killers' Kiss.** This chapter focuses on the peace of Dardanus, the revolt of the Anatolian cities against Mithradates, and the incidents that led to the second Mithridatic wars.

**Chapter 11: Living Like a King.** This chapter presents a comprehensive picture of Mithradates as a monarch. Mithradates' toxicology experiments, the famous Mithradatum antidote, Mithradates' love of art, and his luxurious life, along with his strong interest in learning foreign languages, are among the topics that are examined in this chapter. Regarding Mithradates' skills in language, Mayor has exaggerated by following ancient authors such as Aulus Gellius (XVII, 17) and Pliny (VII, 24, 88-90). It is very unlikely that Mithradates, as mentioned by these sources, knew 22 to 25 languages. There is no independent witness in this regard. Based on the surviving inscriptions of Mithradates as well as his coins, we can only say with certainty that he mastered the Greek language. Also, his mastery of the Persian language, which was the language of his ancestors, is very likely. After Persian and Greek, Armenian, Parthian, Scythian and Latin languages are also in priority due to Mithradates' complex diplomacy. But his mastery of languages such as Avestan, Sanskrit, Sumerian, ancient Persian, Egyptian, Aramaic, and Hebrew, as Mayor says, is almost impossible.

**Chapter 12: Falling Star.** This chapter deals with the beginning of Mithradates' downfall and how he turned to scorched earth policy and flight after suffering heavy defeats from Rome. To the eyes of the Romans, Mithradates' new fighting strategy was a sign of his fear and cowardice, but Mayor rightly argues that this method was a new tactic after learning from past failures, a strategy that the Parthians later used to defeat the Romans many times and unfortunately the author does not mention it. Mayor considers works such as Xenophon's *Anabasis* to be Mithradates' inspiration in this



regard, while a large number of his forces were Scythians who were skilled in this type of warfare, so Mithradates possibly adopted such tactics under the influence of his Scythian adherents.

*Chapter 13: Renegade Kings.* Continuing the previous chapter, Chapter 13 deals with the Roman advances in Pontus and Asia Minor. Among the vital topics that are raised in this chapter is the possible connection between Antikythera being the Globe of Billarius, an idea that was first proposed by Attilio Mastrocinque (2009: 313-320). This chapter has a lot to say about Mithradates' relationship with Tigranes and his war against Rome.

*Chapter 14: End Game.* Most of the content of this chapter is devoted to how Mithradates passed through the Caucasus mountains and reached the Bosporan Kingdom. Using ancient sources as well as the geography of the Caucasus, Mayor recreates Mithradates' movement route in detail, which is considered one of the wonders of antiquity. In this chapter, the author also deals in detail with Mithradates' relationship with Hypsocratea, a Scythian warrior woman who finds a legendary place in medieval works.

*Chapter 15: In the Tower.* This chapter deals with the heroic death of Mithradates and his suicide. In this chapter, the author proposes opinions, although exciting but do not seem convincing. For example, Mithradates may have faked his death and did not die, or Mithradates' favorite lover Hypsocratea is the same historian Hypsocratea who was under the patronage of Julius Caesar. The reasons given by Mayor for these views are not strong and, therefore, remain speculative.

*Appendix and Notes:* Among the advantages of the book are its detailed notes and appendix. As mentioned before, Appendix One is dedicated to comparing Mithradates' life with other heroes of antiquity. Appendix Two deals with the reflection of Mithradates' life and rule in the art, literature, and popular culture of later periods. The notes of the book contain very valuable historical information. However, there are two gross historical errors in the note 20 of chapter 11, and that is two great Persian scientists, Rhazes and Avicenna, are introduced as Arab physicians. This mistake, of course, has become common among many western scholars since both of the aforementioned scientists wrote their works mainly in Arabic, which was the scientific language of the Islamic world.

## Conclusion

The Poison King not only has many new words about Mithradates VI but also because of its rich bibliography, it can be the starting point for other new research. To highlight the importance of this book, it is better to return to the author's three basic claims in the introduction:

- This is the first book to explain the inspiration and scientific principles underlying Mithradates' antidote.
- This book takes up the challenge of trying to write from outside a Roman point of reference.
- This is the first full-scale biography of Mithradates from birth to death and beyond, in well over a century.

A comparison between *The Poison King* and earlier works shows that all these claims are genuine. This book is especially important for scholars of Iranian history, who have rarely studied the history of Pontus. In this book, Mayor correctly points out the Iranian characteristics of Mithradates' rule and personality. Especially, the discussions about Mithradates' religion are important to the study of the Zoroastrian religion and the origins of Mithraism. Unfortunately, Mayor does not specify Mithradates' religion explicitly, nor does she address the effect of Mithridatic wars on the spread of Mithraism in Rome. Finally, it should be emphasized that Mayor has succeeded in presenting an image of Mithradates VI independent of pro-Roman sources, while her work is not biased or in favor of Mithradates.

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