

❧ INTRODUCTION ❧

Long ago and far away, in a little kingdom by the sea, a dazzling comet in the East foretold the birth of a remarkable Prince who would dare to make war on the mightiest empire. As an infant in his cradle, he was marked for greatness by lightning. While he was still a boy, enemies in the castle poisoned his father, the King. His own mother, the Queen, tried to do away with the Prince. But he escaped and lived like Robin Hood in the wilderness for seven years. He grew strong and brave and learned the secrets of poisons and antidotes. The Prince returned to his kingdom and killed the wicked Queen. He became a beloved King, ruling over many nations. When the powerful Empire across the sea invaded his realm, people from many lands joined his grand war. The battles against the Empire lasted his whole lifetime. Many beautiful queens sat by his side, but the King found true love with a woman as valiant in battle as he. When the King died, his passing was echoed by a terrible earthquake. For thousands of years afterward, the Great King's legendary deeds were remembered and retold.

IT SOUNDS like a fairy tale.¹ But add the documented facts and it's history. In about 120 BC, Mithradates VI Eupator the Great, king of Pontus, inherited a small but wealthy kingdom on the Black Sea (northeastern Turkey). Mithradates (Mith-ra-DAY-tees) is a Persian name meaning "sent by Mithra," the ancient Iranian Sun god. Two variant spellings were used in antiquity—Greek inscriptions favored *Mithradates*; the Romans preferred *Mithridates*. As a descendant of Persian royalty and of Alexander the Great, Mithradates saw himself bridging East and West and as the defender of the East against Roman domination. A complex leader of superb intelligence and fierce ambition, Mithradates boldly challenged the late Roman Republic, first with a shocking massacre and then in a series of wars that lasted nearly forty years.²

Poisoning was a traditional political weapon. Mithradates' father was murdered with poison, and Mithradates foiled several poison plots against

himself. As a child, he dreamed of making himself immune to poisons. After hundreds of experiments, Mithradates unlocked the pharmacological paradox still studied today: poisons can be beneficial as well as lethal. Many believed that his special antidote was the reason for his celebrated vigor and longevity. After his death, Mithradates' trademarked elixir was imbibed by Roman emperors, Chinese mandarins, and European kings and queens, inspiring a flow of scientific treatises on the Poison King's mastery of toxicology. This is the first book to explain the inspiration and scientific principles underlying Mithradates' antidote.

Mithradates was an erudite patron of the arts and sciences. His military engineers built the first water-powered mill and technologically advanced siege engines. The cryptic Antikythera mechanism, the world's first computer, may have been one of Mithradates' prized possessions.

Recruiting vast, ethnically diverse armies from far-flung lands, Mithradates envisioned a powerful Black Sea Empire to rival Rome's might. He won magnificent victories and suffered devastating defeats in some of the most spectacular battles in antiquity. Luring the Romans deeper into hostile lands, Mithradates forced them to conquer and occupy the rich territory that they had intended only to plunder. Rome's best generals won battle after battle but were never able to lay their hands on the last "untamed" monarch to defy the Roman juggernaut. His followers revered him as the long-awaited savior of the East. The Romans called him the Eastern Hannibal.

Mithradates became a legend in his own time. After the long Mithradatic Wars, even the Romans developed a grudging admiration for their most relentless enemy. Mithradates enjoyed a colorful afterlife in art, music, and literature (see appendix 2). Medieval artists illustrated harrowing scenes from his reign, portraying him as a noble "Dark Knight" battling cruel Roman tyrants. Machiavelli praised him as a valiant hero; his reign fascinated Louis XIV. Immortalized in a tragedy by the great French playwright Racine, Mithradates and his doomed harem also inspired the fourteen-year-old Mozart to write his first opera. Poets celebrated the King of Poison: "I tell the tale that I heard told. Mithridates, he died old."³ But even the details about Mithradates' last hours, death, and burial are shrouded in mystery.

For two millennia, Mithradates' extraordinary military and scientific achievements made him a household name, a major figure in the Roman Republic's all-star cast of characters, alongside Hannibal, Spartacus, Cleopatra, and Julius Caesar. Over the past half century, however, Mithradates' name and deeds began to fade from popular memory. Of all the

nations that “came into mortal conflict with Rome,” mourned one writer, “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.”⁴

But there are signs that Mithradates’ star is rising again, as historians and archaeologists reconsider ancient struggles against imperialism, and as scientists revive the old dream of a universal antidote to toxic weapons. New crises ignite in many of the strategic lands where Mithradates once ruled, fought, and won allies, a list familiar from today’s headlines: Greece, Turkey, Armenia, Ukraine, Russia, Crimea, Georgia, Chechnya, Azerbaijan, Syria, Kurdistan, Iran, Iraq. While researching Mithradates’ astonishing feat of crossing the Caucasus Mountains to make his last stand in the Crimea, I pored over maps of this little-known yet historically important corner of the world. In August 2008, the Caucasus burst onto the world stage, as the Russian army attacked Georgia (ancient Colchis)—an independent former Soviet republic—over the contested regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Invaders and refugees streamed over the very same rugged mountain pass traveled by Mithradates’ fugitive army two thousand years ago.

Mithradates’ name may be unfamiliar in the West today, but his reputation as a defender against imperialism was not forgotten in the East. “Everyone knows the history of the struggle between Rome and Mithridates,” declared the great Russian historian Mikhail Rostovtzeff, and “everyone remembers that Mithradates made his last stand” in south Russia. In some former republics of the Soviet Union, Mithradates is still a local icon. For example, a Georgian biography of Mit’ridat appeared in 1965, and Russian novels about Tsar Mitridate Yevpatorus came out in 1993 and 2004. Between wars, sporadic scholarly and archaeological research takes place in Mithradates’ Black Sea Empire. Considering the recent spate of political poisonings in Ukraine and Russia, there is black humor in the name of a bar in the king’s old city of Pantikapaion (modern Kerch), daring you to order a drink in Mithradates’ Place.⁵

In lands once allied with or ruled by Mithradates, he is recalled as a charismatic leader who resisted Western encroachment. In Armenia and Kurdistan, for example, many consider Mithradates (Mehrdad, Mir-dad, Mhrtat) a national hero.⁶ After a long period of ignoring Mithradates, Turkey is beginning to take an interest in the first ruler to unite and defend the diverse peoples of Anatolia against foreign invaders. In 2007, historian Murat Arslan published his dissertation *Mithradates VI Eupator, Roma’nin Büyük Düşmanı* (“Rome’s Great Enemy”), on the “an-

cient Anatolian hero, little known and neglected until today.” Arslan likens Mithradates, in his defense of Anatolia against the Romans, to Alexander the Great saving Asia from the Persian Empire. The leading Turkish historian Sencer Sahin compares Mithradates to the Turkish national hero Atatürk, who successfully fought foreign invaders.⁷

ANCIENT SOURCES FOR MITHRADATES' LIFE

Nearly everything we know of Mithradates was written from his enemies' perspective, by the inheritors of Roman imperial culture who looked through a Roman lens eastward toward the expanding frontiers of the empire. The extant (and missing) ancient sources for Mithradates' life and times have been comprehensively evaluated by modern historians of the Roman world.⁸ Of the fifty or so ancient texts that contributed details of Mithradates' life, our chief sources are Justin's summary of a lost history by Pompeius Trogus; Appian's *Mithradatic Wars*; Cassius Dio'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 the Roman generals (Sulla, Lucullus, Pompey) who fought the Mithradatic Wars. Important material also appears in Pliny's *Natural History*, fragments of Sallust and Livy, and Diodorus of Sicily, Ammianus Marcellinus, Galen, and other Latin and Greek authors.

These ancient writers were able to consult the works of many other historians and a host of records, archives, living memories, and oral folklore, all irretrievable. Because the surviving texts were written from the vantage point of the victorious Roman Empire, outright and subtle biases were inevitable. To tell Mithradates' story from his own perspective, one would need to stand on the shores of the Black Sea and look, not just west toward Rome and Greece, but outward in all directions from Mithradates' kingdom and the allied lands that resisted Rome, lands with their own vital cultures and empires. This book takes up the challenge of trying to write from outside a Roman point of reference, to evoke a time before the imposing edifice of the triumphant Roman Empire.

As is often pointed out, certain foes of the Romans ended up more famous than their conquerors. Rome's fascination with its dangerous enemies, and admiration for their courage and ideals, produced a wealth of biographical material. Some Roman writers (Cicero, Tacitus, and Diodorus) were sharply critical of Rome's harsh imperialism and avarice. At least three sources (Strabo, Plutarch, and Trogus) had personal links

to the Mithradatic Wars. They understood animosity toward the late Roman Republic and treated some aspects of Mithradates' life favorably. Regrettably, we cannot consult the lost accounts by Mithradates' contemporaries who were personally involved in the wars, such as Rutilius Rufus, Lucius Cornelius Sisenna, Lenaeus, Metrodorus, and Hypsicrates.⁹

Intriguing clues in ancient and medieval texts are now all that remain of a rich store of lively anecdotes that once circulated orally about Mithradates. Every scrap in the literary record is valuable—along with artistic, numismatic, epigraphical, and archaeological evidence, much of it only recently come to light. A surprising amount of material about Mithradates and his times can be pieced together, to form a flickering picture of his upbringing and education, influences and heroes, speeches and appeal to followers, military strategies, scientific experiments and leisure pursuits, love affairs, hopes and doubts, motivations, and his complex psychology—even the king's moods, jokes, and dreams were recorded.

HISTORICAL METHODS

The incomplete nature of the ancient record sometimes forces historians into the realm of guesswork. In such cases, the approach followed by the great detective Sherlock Holmes is appropriate. When compelled to rely on “guesswork,” Holmes explained his method thus: We must “balance probabilities and choose the most likely. It is the scientific use of the imagination, but we have always some material basis on which to work.”¹⁰

In piecing together a coherent historical narrative from “broken shards,” to reconstruct missing elements that were taken for granted but not described in the ancient record, historians of antiquity draw on classical and modern knowledge to fill in background details of economy, cultural influences, climate, geography, topography, natural history, political alliances, and so on. Historical reconstruction is essential in retrieving a fully realized life of any ancient figure. In the endeavor to balance fidelity to history with fidelity to an individual from the past, however, character and motivations “cannot be completely and authentically represented or expressed in the domain of history” alone. To be faithful to Mithradates, the historical person we can never really know, one can apply “the scientific use of the imagination” to fill in the spaces between surviving accounts and contextual facts. This is especially apposite for Mithradates, a unique, atypical Hellenistic ruler.¹¹

In recent years, historians have also introduced counterfactual, “vir-

tual,” or “what if” thought experiments as tools for understanding the meaning and ramifications of historical events, imagining alternative outcomes and filling in gaps. These techniques are not a modern invention. As early as the fifth century BC, for example, the Greek historian Herodotus and the playwright Euripides recounted alternative versions of the story of Helen of Troy, in which Helen never went to Troy but spent the entire war in Egypt. The Roman historian Livy asked what would have happened had Alexander the Great lived to invade Italy (Livy argued that Rome would have defeated him).¹²

John Lewis Gaddis’s *Landscape of History* (2002) was influential in helping me map uncharted areas of Mithradates’ life while maintaining historical fidelity. Gaddis also explains how scenario building allows historians to use their imaginations to revisit and replay the past, by asking in a disciplined way what might have happened under specific conditions.¹³

To narrate (and in a few cases to dramatize) Mithradates’ story, I sometimes flesh out missing elements in the historical record, drawing on known facts, literary and archaeological evidence, comparable events, and probabilities. In these instances, I follow the widely accepted rules for disciplined alternative history, established in Niall Ferguson’s *Virtual History* (2000): the details must be probable or plausible for Mithradates’ time and place, and they must match contemporary experiences, derived from ancient literature, art, and history and/or archaeology. Phrases like “might have,” “could have,” and “perhaps” signal these passages, but I also clearly identify, in text or endnotes, all instances of my filling in gaps or dead ends, adding historically appropriate details, reconciling contradictory accounts, or proposing logical scenarios for how events could have unfolded. In proposing scenarios, I adhere to the known historical landmarks and “conditions of possibility” in the ancient sources. This approach differs significantly from historical fiction, in which novelists are free to contradict known facts and create new characters and conditions.¹⁴

MODERN VIEWS OF MITHRADATES AND HIS BLACK SEA EMPIRE

Despite his extraordinary achievements and role in the downfall of the Roman Republic, Mithradates has received remarkably little scholarly or popular attention. Théodore Reinach’s magisterial *Mithridate Eupator, roi du Pont*, in French (1890) and German (1895), remains a great au-

thority on Mithradates, despite its *Belle Epoch* outlook. Since Reinach, a great deal of new material—scientific studies, historical analyses, and archaeological evidence—has come to light to explain Mithradates' toxicological research, his rich afterlife, his Black Sea context, and his ambitions and accomplishments. *The Poison King* is the first full-scale biography of Mithradates, from birth to death and beyond, in well over a century.

The first work exclusively about Mithradates in English was a popular biography by the historical novelist Alfred Duggan: *He Died Old: Mithradates Eupator, King of Pontus* (1958). Duggan's references to "cringing Asiatics" and "red Indians" date the book drastically. A stereotyped image of Mithradates as a cruel, decadent "oriental sultan," an "Asiatic" enemy of culture and civilization, originated in the 1850s with the great Roman historian Theodor Mommsen. Lâtife Summerer's survey of Mithradates' reception in Europe draws attention to the racist assumptions of Mommsen, who compared Mithradates to Ottoman despots, and of Hermann Bengtson, writing a century later, who declared that the massacre of 88 BC "could only be conceived in the brain of an Asiatic barbarian." As Summerer notes, Reinach, who praised Mithradates' intellect, claimed that his portraits revealed the "broad nostrils, thick lips, and fleshy chin of a self-indulgent oriental sultan," in contrast to the perfect profiles of classical Greeks. Mommsen's stereotype persists in, for example, Colleen McCullough's novel *The Grass Crown* (1991).

Michael Curtis Ford's 2004 novel *The Last King*, told from the point of view of Mithradates' son, portrays the king as a brilliant Greek commander. Mithradates makes an appearance as "an ambitious despot" from the East, "power hungry and ruthless," in Tom Holland's *Rubicon* (2003), and a military history by Philip Matyszak depicts Mithradates as savage and vindictive, "almost a monster," but magnificent in defeat.¹⁵

European scholars after Reinach have focused on specific aspects of Mithradates' reign. Brian McGing analyzes his propaganda and diplomacy in *The Foreign Policy of Mithridates VI Eupator* (1986). The campaigns against Mithradates from the Roman perspective are covered in the *Cambridge Ancient History*, volume 9 (Crook et al. 1994). Luis Ballasteros Pastor's *Mitridates Eupator, rey del Ponto* (1996) assessed Mithradates' conflicts with Rome as an independent Hellenistic monarch, and Attilio Mastrocinque's *Studi sulle guerre Mitridatiche* (1999) considered how ancient biases influenced modern views of the king.

The lands around the Black Sea are beginning to attract scholarly attention in their own right. Stephen Mitchell's two-volume *Anatolia*

(1993–95) was the first comprehensive study devoted to ancient Asia Minor. The Black Sea Trade Project (1996) of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology used advanced archaeological techniques to explore ancient Sinope, the capital of Mithradates' kingdom. In 2006, archaeologist Gocha Tsetskhladze founded the interdisciplinary journal *Ancient West & East*. The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Institute of History sponsors scholarship about Eurasia, defined as stretching from the Yellow Sea to the Danube. Deniz Burcu Erciyas (2006) surveyed Mithradatid archaeology around the Black Sea; Susan Alcock's "archaeology of memory" is uncovering the impact of Roman imperialism in Armenia; and a study of the impact of the Mithradatic Wars on civilians, by Toni Naco del Hoyo and colleagues, appeared in 2009. The Danish Centre for Black Sea Studies (founded in 2002) hosted an international conference of leading Mithradates scholars in 2007: the superb collection of papers, *Mithridates VI and the Pontic Kingdom*, was also published in 2009.¹⁶

For many readers, Mithradates' story may bring to mind current events in the Middle East, Transcaucasia, and former Soviet republics around the Black Sea. As a classical folklorist and a historian of ancient science, I first became fascinated by Mithradates' life and legend while researching unconventional warfare and the use of poisons in antiquity.¹⁷ My initial research began in the shadow of the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001, on New York City and the Pentagon, masterminded by the charismatic Islamic leader Osama bin Laden, who eluded capture by disappearing into the mountains between Afghanistan and Pakistan. I began writing during the "war on terror" and invasion of Iraq in 2003, which President George W. Bush justified by a spurious *casus belli*, claiming that Saddam Hussein of Iraq not only possessed weapons of mass destruction but was protecting the terrorists responsible for 9/11. As of this writing, spring 2009, U.S. military forces have been unable to capture or kill Osama bin Laden and are still engaged in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Some parallels with Rome's decades-long failed mission to capture Mithradates have already been drawn by others.

Mithradates' blows against a Western superpower two thousand years ago have begun to recapture the attention of Western commentators and the supporters of Islamic insurgencies. As it has for two millennia, Mithradates' name continues to strike discordant notes. Italian journalists compared Osama bin Laden to Mithradates in 2003. In 2007, a classicist and conservative commentator, E. Christian Kopff, remarked that

“Rome suffered its own version of 9/11 in 88 BC,” when Mithradates “massacred 80,000 Roman and Italian businessmen and traders and their families.” Even though many Roman generals defeated Mithradates in battles, he “remained at large, a hero in the Near East,” posing a threat to Rome’s national interest as long as he lived.¹⁸

“The story of Rome and Mithridates is worth pondering today,” notes Robert W. Merry, an expert on international economics. “Imperial expansion always breeds the likes of Mithridates in the far-flung reaches of the imperial domain.” It was the decades of inconclusive wars in the Near East to crush Mithradates and his followers, remarked Merry, that ushered in the “internal chaos and violence” which would end the four-hundred-year-old Roman Republic.¹⁹

Islamicists and their sympathizers often cast their resistance to Western superpowers in terms of resistance to “Rumieh,” the Arabic name for ancient Rome. The former Indian ambassador to Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Jordan, K. Gajendra Singh, sees “echoes of Mithradates” in the Iraq War. He maintains that Western hegemony in the Middle East began when the Roman army first invaded Anatolia. Since then, says Singh, the West has “demonized Mithradates VI of Pontus for standing up to Rome.” In Singh’s view, the West exploits Mideast oil resources “with the connivance of client rulers” just as the Roman Empire “ruthlessly exploited and taxed their subjects in Asia.”²⁰

Striking parallels between current world crises and the Mithradatic Wars arose during the completion of this book. The resurgence of piracy on the high seas, as Somalian pirates captured international oil tankers and held them for ransom, recalls the powerful pirate fleets of the first century BC, allies of Mithradates. Piracy thrives when authority is disputed and superpowers are distracted. Rome, contending with civil uprisings and provincial revolts as well as with Mithradates’ challenges, was severely hindered by the pirates infesting the Black Sea and Mediterranean.

The global economic collapse of 2008/9 bears striking similarities to the financial catastrophe that Rome suffered when Mithradates invaded Rome’s Province of Asia and wiped out the Roman presence there in 88 BC. As the great statesman Cicero explained, when so many thousands of “investors lost large fortunes, there was a collapse of credit at Rome, because repayments were interrupted. It is impossible for many individuals in a single state to lose their property and fortunes without involving still greater numbers in their ruin.”²¹

MITHRADATES' SIDE OF THE STORY

Extreme, charismatic personalities have always attracted popular fascination. In explaining the magnetism of the “Bad Men of antiquity” (and modernity), Edward Champlin, biographer of two Roman emperors with notoriously negative press, Nero and Tiberius, cites a fundamental truth: those considered heroes are not always good human beings.²² Many revered historical figures perpetrated deplorable acts. And even ultimate failure need not tarnish heroic status; nobility in defeat can win glory.

Combining the history of science, military history, and biography, I tell a tale of genius, charisma, and idealism ultimately destroyed by a powerful empire that could tolerate no rival. Capable of savage acts as well as gallant compassion, Mithradates embodied paradox. He was a Persian monarch who idealized democratic Greece and despised the Romans as uncivilized barbarians. The typical view of classical antiquity pits the civilized West (Greece, Rome) against the barbarian East (Persia).²³ Mithradates' dream was to unite the great cultures of Greece and the East to resist the seemingly unstoppable tide of the Roman Empire. In this romantic goal—and against impossible odds—Mithradates carried forward Alexander's vision of a new, diverse Greco-Asian empire for more than half a century.

My goal is to render a three-dimensional, holistic portrait of Mithradates and his world, and to try to explain his complex legacy. An articulate and erudite philhellene, admirer of Alexander the Great, and proud heir of Cyrus and Darius of Persia, he was a courageous warrior, brilliant strategist, devious poisoner, daring gambler, scientific researcher, avid lover, unpredictable parent, connoisseur of art and theater, escape artist, sometime terrorist, and relentless nemesis of the Roman Empire. Mithradates' vital afterlife in art, music, literature, and science is an important part of the story. This is the first biography to take account of the popular lore that surrounded Mithradates from his birth to the present day. To illuminate his life and the legend, I've drawn on the widest possible range of sources, from antiquity to international modern scholarship, and from the most recent numismatic, archaeological, epigraphical, and pharmacological discoveries to medieval chronicles, Gothic folklore, European tragedies, operas, modern fiction, and poetry.

Like the paradoxical toxins and antidotes he sought to control, Mithradates was a double-edged sword: corrosive of the predatory Roman Re-

public and protector of Rome's intended prey. In the end, the Romans emerged victorious. Yet Mithradates proved to the world that the new Roman Empire was not invincible. He forced the Romans to conquer and occupy the Mideast, a perpetual trouble spot for them. His popular cause led Rome to rethink its imperial policies. The long pursuit of this formidable enemy coincided with the death of the old Roman ideals of honor and freedom. 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.

Mithradates' story is well worth our attention. Modern parallels may sharpen our interest. But as the curious reader delves deeper into the ancient narratives, one is swept away by the sheer audacity, the epic defiance, the chiaroscuro effect of treachery and revenge set against compassion and idealism, the noble dreams and dreadful nightmares, and the tantalizing unsolved mysteries. Mithradates' incredible saga is a rollicking good story.