

The Poison King - The Life and Legend of Mithradates, Rome's Deadliest Enemy
by Adrienne Mayor.
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Mithradates of Pontus, or Mithradates VI Eupator Dionysus to give him his full title, was the greatest thorn in the side of the Roman republic, an inspired leader of men and lover of women, a prolific poisoner with an encyclopaedic knowledge of poisons and their antidotes and a man whose life and legend seem to blend seamlessly with each other.

Mithradates was born in 135 BCE, his birth coinciding with the appearance of a comet which everyone, including Mithradates himself, believed marked him out not just for greatness but as a saviour of his people. After his mother murdered his father at a state banquet (a not uncommon occurrence in the period or region) Mithradates fled with his most trusted companions and bided his time for several years before staging a triumphant return and assuming his throne.

Inevitably, with his pretensions to an Asian empire, and his belief that he was a new Alexander or Hannibal, Mithradates was always going to come into conflict with the other nascent power of his day, Rome. Mithradates initially made some small efforts to toe the line and play the Romans at their own game, but in the end he threw down a spectacular and gruesome gauntlet by initiating the murder of 80,000 Roman citizens in 88 BCE. Thus Rome's long wars against Mithradates began, and although he won little and lost much he showed an astonishing ability to elude his enemies.

But in 66BCE, Rome appointed Pompey the Great to command the war against Mithradates, and he was to prove the king's nemesis, though far from straight away. In the end, Mithradates died of a combination of poison administered at his own hand, and the sword of his bodyguard Bituitus, the poison having failed to take effect, perhaps due to the lifetime of antidotes that Mithradates had consumed on a regular basis. The last straw was not simply the overwhelming power of Rome, but the acclamation by his people of his son Pharnaces as his successor.

Adrienne Mayor presents her readers with a superbly detailed story, written in a lyrical style and with the factual gaps in her narrative filled in with informed and persuasive conjecture. Like other historical monsters, it is hard to resist the awful magnificence of Mithradates' life, or to fail to appreciate the style with which he conducted every aspect of it. The Poison King is a book that should satisfy any student of ancient history, for it is, as the author herself states at the end of her introduction, "a rollicking good story".

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh