

MITHRADATES: THE MAKINGS OF THE PERFECT FOE ♦

Cristian GHÎȚĂ*

Abstract: The present paper aims to trace the manner in which both Mithradates VI Eupator and his arch-enemies, the Romans, used propaganda means to project a particular image in the eyes of their contemporaries and of posterity. Literary sources will be compared with one another and with other sources, such as inscriptions and numismatic evidence, in order to trace the flow of ideas from one author to another and from one age to another.

Keywords: Mithradates VI Eupator, dynastic myth, reception of propaganda

In a lengthy interview with Luca Canali in which different parallels were established between Imperial Rome and modern America, Italian journalist Edoardo Vigna produced this gem of a question: “Was Mithradates more like Osama or like Saddam?”¹ Besides providing numerous moments of involuntary humour, this discussion illustrates the general human need to cast today’s enemies into the mould of mythic villains. Sometimes, this model is explicit – as was the case with Mithradates in this interview – but at other times the archetype is only hinted at. This mental process, of creating and deploying myths in everyday life has two probable causes.

One is the universally-felt drive to economise on one’s efforts. It is always easier to fall back on a myth and to use it in order to make sense of a given event in reality because myths are generally clear and unambiguous, whereas reality has numerous uncertainties and nuances that make it hard to navigate. Thus, the clear contours of an archetype are superimposed on the blurred outlines of a real event, placing it squarely inside a pre-determined class and making any assessment and decision regarding it an easy thing to do.

The other possible cause is what one might call the apotropaic role of the myth: it is hoped that if the mythical narrative took a certain course, then the real event with which it is being associated will unfold along the same general lines. In the case of

♦ The author’s research was funded through the University of Bucharest’s postdoctoral programme in the Humanities and Social Sciences, which is co-financed by the European Social Fund within the Sectorial Operational Program Human Resources Development 2007-2013 (POSDRU/89/1.5/S/62259).

* postdoctoral researcher at the University of Bucharest.

¹ Edoardo Vigna, “Ma l’impero Americano è come quello Romano?”, *Sette (Corriere della Sera)*, n. 13 (2003), pp. 33–43.

our interview, which was published in March 2003, one can almost feel how the journalist, by associating Osama with Mithradates, is almost trying to force upon the former the fate of the latter – the perfect foe, one that might fight hard and might be wily enough to fight his way out of a tight corner in the short run, but one who will be, eventually, defeated.

In the present paper I will attempt to trace the story of Mithradates in Antiquity and follow its twists and turns, until the moment when, in the Late Imperial Age, he is included in *De viris illustribus*, the literary gallery displaying famous Roman heroes – one of the very few foreigners to be given the honour, in the select company of Pyrrhus, Hannibal, Antiochus III or Cleopatra. All of them had doubtlessly earned their place by being “perfect foes”, each in his or her own right. Cicero even placed him well above all the other enemies Rome had faced: “And if one were to ponder what Mithridates could do, what he did and what sort of a man he was, it would come as no surprise that this king would be placed above all others with whom the Roman people has waged war”².

This is, therefore, in many ways, a paper about propaganda, for the object is not to discover Mithradates, that man made of flesh and bone, but Mithradates the myth, Mithradates the prop, Mithradates the tool deployed by others to meet their own ends. These ends cover a wide spectrum, from brutally political to amusingly literary, but we must acknowledge that every author, when referring to him, selected that information which best suited his purpose. Understanding that bias will be an important part of this undertaking.

So who are the men behind the Mithradates myth? The first and probably most important was Mithridates himself, who deployed a whole array of propaganda tools to project and enhance his prestige, from the choice of portraiture on his coins to public displays of his royal person on different stately occasions and even going to such lengths as being the star, director and producer of a theatrical show, which involved complicated special effects, like having the goddess Victory (or, rather, a marble statue depicting the divine figure) descend from the heavens and place a golden wreath upon his head³.

Then, acting to a good degree in tandem with the King, the members of the Court or his more distant sympathisers also contributed to his prestige, by setting up inscriptions praising him or erecting monuments glorifying him, all the while making a statement about their own importance, which came as a corollary of their intimacy with him⁴.

On the contrary, his Greek and Roman enemies did their best to tarnish his image, though their lines of attack differed depending on the context – from

² “*Atqui si diligenter quid Mithridates potuerit et quid effecerit et qui vir fuerit consideraris, omnibus quibuscum populus Romanus bellum gessit hunc regem nimirum antepones.*” Cicero, *Pro Murena*, 31.

³ Plutarch, *Sulla*, 11.

⁴ Patric-Alexander Kreuz, „Monuments for the King: Royal Presence in the Late-Hellenistic World of Mithridates VI”, in Jakob Munk Højte, *Mithridates VI and the Pontic Kingdom*, Aarhus University Press 2009.

depicting him as a cowardly whelp to painting him in the guise of a modern Xerxes, a monument of hubris and cruelty.

As the political relevance of Mithradates dissipated with time, his memory was appropriated for literary games, and this is the ground of choice for people who never let the truth get in the way of a good story. It is to some extent frustrating that we are usually not able to determine whether one particular story we find in a later document originates in a source contemporary with the king or not, but we can be sure that at least in some cases the myth-making process did not die with him.

In the rest of this paper, I will try to analyse several of the labels applied to Mithradates, and see how they consolidated over time and to whose benefit. I prefer this approach, because simply taking a chronological approach and listing ancient authors and their opinions about the Pontic king seemed rather less fruitful. I will follow two pairs of antithetic binomes, because I hope this will illuminate better the fact that, although our sources come almost invariably from the side of the victors, the propaganda war was by no means one-sided.

The first pair of epithets that will be discussed below is ‘generous’ / ‘cruel’. This pair of opposites serves as a template for other epithets applied to the Pontic king: “pious and impious”, “courageous and cowardly” etc. All of these features and several others then combine to define yet another antithesis, and one which seems to have been the crux of the matter for a very long time: ‘Hellenophile king’/ ‘Barbarian despot’.

We hear that Mithradates was a generous man, both to individuals and to communities. Thus, we find in Athenaeus’ *Deipnosophistai* the following story: “Nikolaos the peripatetic philosopher, says that Mithradates, the Pontic king, had created competitions of eating and drinking, whose prize was a talent of silver. He won both of them, yet he offered the prize to the competitor who came second after himself, namely Kalamodrys of Cyzicus”⁵. We also hear from Plutarch’s *Life of Pompey* of the great riches bestowed by Mithradates upon the father of Stratonike, one of his concubines: “he saw inside <his house> tables full of silver and golden beakers, a host of servants, eunuchs and young slaves who were bringing him garments of the richest kind, and in front of his door a horse caparisoned exactly like those ridden by the king’s Friends”⁶. A similar story is told by Strabon, in the 10th book of his *Geographika*, when he narrates the history of his family, brought back from exile and endowed with many gifts by Eupator himself. The king’s generosity was not limited to individuals – whole cities enjoyed his favour. Thus, he

⁵ Νικολαος δ’ ὁ περιπατητικὸς [...] Μιθριδῆτην φησὶ τὸν Ποντικὸν βασιλῆα προθῆντα γίνα πολυφαγῶς καὶ πολυποσῶς (ὃν δὲ τὸ ἄθλον τῆλαντον ἔργου) ἄμφω νικῆσαι. τοῦ μῦθου ἄθλου ἔκστῆναι τὸ μετ’ αὐτὸν κριθῆντι Καλαμόδρῳ τῷ Κυζικηνῷ ἄθλητῷ. Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistai*, 10.9.

⁶ [...] ἐδεν ἴδον κτωμάτων μὲν ἔργου καὶ χρυσῶν τραπέζας ἄλλων δὲ θεραπεῶν πολὺν ἐνοχλοῦς δὲ καὶ παῖδας ἄμματα τὸν πολυτελεῶν προσφροντας αὐτῶν καὶ πρὸ τῶς θύρας ἔπνον ἔστῆτα κεκοσμημῶνον ἄσπερ οὐ τὸν φῶλων τοῦ βασιλῆως. Plutarch, *Pompeius*, 36.4.

honours and embellishes the cities of Sinope and Amisos, and grants one hundred talents to the city of Apameia, badly damaged by an earthquake⁷. Also, the inhabitants of Arykandis put their hopes in him to clear them of debts⁸, but we do not know whether Eupator actually met their fairly insolent demands.

That a king should do his best to advertise himself as generous is hardly surprising. Euergetism was, in that age when the political supremacy of kings came as a matter of fact, an essential component of the perpetual minuet in which monarchs and subjects were engaged. Thus, we can be fairly certain which was the ultimate source of the information that has reached us through Strabo, Plutarch or Athenaeus, but what could motivate these authors to include it in their works?

It has been argued⁹ that Strabo is consistently trying to emphasize the importance of the contribution brought by Asia Minor to the world in terms of culture, attempting in a way to demonstrate it is by no means a periphery of the Greco-Roman world. So, in the process of mentioning Eupator's contribution, he is in fact emphasizing the urban amenities that those cities were boasting at the time. Plutarch, for one, seems to be very much interested in debasing Stratonike, the king's concubine, by depicting her as having been purchased from her inept father, and emphasizing thus that unions between a Greek woman and a barbarian are morally repulsive, a tune he would also play when commenting on the fate of Monime, another Greek woman married to Mithradates and who is forced by her husband to commit suicide in order to avoid capture by the Romans. As for Athenaeus, he seems to be interested in preserving the memory of the Hellenistic Age, which is often surrounded with the pink haze of the Belle Époque, sometimes excessive, sometimes decadent, but all the more charming for that.

It was in the power of a king to deliver both gifts and misery, and we are informed that Mithradates was no exception. He punished, and punished harshly anyone whom he saw as an enemy. According to Memnon, he started by killing his mother and brother: "Mithridates was thirsty for blood even as a child. He acquired the power at the age of thirteen, and not long afterwards he forcefully imprisoned his mother, with whom he had shared the throne according to the wishes of his father, and after a while killed her. He also murdered his brother"¹⁰. He then proceeded to murder his nephew and eventually had his own wives executed¹¹. Appian, an Alexandrian scholar, who dedicated a book to the wars waged by the Romans against Mithradates, apparently takes delight in painting Eupator's portrait

⁷ Sinope: Strabon, *Geographika*, 12.3.11; Amisos: Strabon, *Geographika*, 12.3.14; Apameia: Strabon, *Geographika*, 12.8.18.

⁸ Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistai*, 12.35.

⁹ P. Desideri, „Strabone e la cultura asiatica”, in A. M. Biraschi & G. Salmeri (edd.), *Strabone e l'Asia Minore*, Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, Napoli, 2000.

¹⁰ Φονικῆς τῆς δὲ κτείνης τῆς Μιθριδῆς τῆς τῆς γῆς ἄρχοντος τρισκαίδεκα τῆς παραλαβῆς μετ' οὗ πολὺ τῆς μητρῆς κοινωνῆς ἀπὸ τοῦ πατρῆος τῆς βασιλείας καταλειφθεῖσαν δέσποτιν κατασχῆν βίβλου καὶ χρῆσθαι ἑξήνων ἡλώσε: καὶ τῆς δὲ ἐλευθέρου πικτείνε. Memnon, *History of Heraclea*, 30.

¹¹ Nephew: Memnon, *History*, 22.1; wives: Memnon, *History*, 30.1.

in the harshest tones possible. His Mithradates is persistently cruel: he executes Aquilius by pouring molten gold down his throat; murders the Galatian tetrarchs and uses exotic tortures to punish deserters.¹²

But the cruelty was by no means limited to his own household or subjects. In an act of supreme vengeance, he is said to have instigated the murder of all the Roman citizens residing in Asia at the time, a true act of genocide that came to be known by the name given to it by Th. Reinach, the “Ephesian Vespers”. Memnon puts the death toll at 80,000 souls; Plutarch, at 150,000; other authors insist that all Italians in Asia perished. Cicero deplors the event in thundering rhetoric while urging bolder action against Eupator by granting Pompey full command in the war against him:

you must wipe off that stain upon the name of the Roman people, created during the last war against Mithridates, which is still deeply seated and has been allowed to grow far too old, namely that he who made sure that all Roman citizens, across the whole of Asia and in the midst of all those cities by one message and one sign only were killed and butchered not only has not so far received the punishment fit for his crime, but continues to reign and has been doing so for the past twenty three years since that day¹³.

If one is to apply the “cui prodest” principle, it is simple to find out who did their best to propagate the story of the massacre: the Romans themselves. Let me go back to one of the points I had made in the introduction – I am not interested here in the confirming or denying the reality of the Ephesian Vespers, or of Mithradates’ involvement in it, I am merely interested in seeing how the story of the Ephesian Vespers was propagated and picked up by the sources. So, who gained the most by preserving the memory of this event? The Romans. Let us go back to the early stages of the First Mithradatic War. Mithradates, though formally an ally of Rome, was being attacked by his Bithynian neighbour, at the transparent instigation of the Roman officials in Asia. Careful to preserve appearances, Mithradates sent envoys to demand the aid of Rome or at least its neutrality. When the reply came that Rome did not want the Bithynian king to come to any harm, the charade was exposed and Mithradates was free to claim the high moral ground, posing as the victim of Roman arrogance and high-handedness. The terrible massacre – well, it must have been terrible, even if the figures we possess are inflated – allowed Rome to reclaim moral superiority and declare credibly that they were the victims, who were, consequently, waging a just war. We see this very clearly in Cicero who, twenty-odd years after the event, still uses it to justify renewed aggression against the Pontic king. Plutarch, who relies heavily on Sulla’s memoirs, was certainly

¹² Appian, *Mithridateios*, 21; Appian, *Mithridateios*, 46; Appian, *Mithridateios*, 97.

¹³ *delenda vobis est illa macula Mithridatico bello superiore concepta quae penitus iam insedit ac nimis inveteravit in populi Romani nomine, quod is qui uno die tota in Asia tot in civitatibus uno nuntio atque una significatione omnis civis Romanos necandos trucidandosque curavit, non modo adhuc poenam nullam suo dignam scelere suscepit sed ab illo tempore annum iam tertium et vicesimum regnat. Cicero, Pro Lege Manilia, 7.*

influenced by the latter’s presentation of motives. Appian made it the goal of his academic life to present as favourably as possible the wars of Rome, which he apparently sees as justified means to spread civilisation. He must have been particularly interested in excusing the Mithradatic wars, for, as he states in the introduction to the *Mithridatika*: “for these reasons I think it fitting that this war is called ‘the great one’, that the victory achieved at its end was named ‘the great’ and that the man who concluded the military operations is known until this very day in his own language as ‘Pompey the Great’”¹⁴. And he continues: “because of the great number of nations they subjected or brought back under their rule, the length of time it lasted – no less than forty years – and the strength and endurance of Mithradates, who opposed the Romans with all his strength in every way he could.”

As for Memnon of Heraclea, his motivation is somewhat different. Even though we cannot determine with precision when it was that Memnon lived, the fact that his work ends with a portrait of his fellow citizen Brithagoras, who spent the last twelve years of his life courting Caesar and following him everywhere in the hope of securing freedom for his city may indicate that this was still a hot political issue. What we can determine with certainty is that he has a very precise agenda – excusing the conduct of his native city during the Mithradatic Wars. It therefore serves his purpose to make his fellow citizens appear as moths caught in the net of an infernal arachnid, one so cruel and so immensely powerful that they could do nothing to resist.

There is one very interesting fragment in which Mithradates’ cruelty combines with generosity to create a very interesting story. It is to be found in one of Plutarch’s minor works, in “*The virtues of women*”. The scene is set with the description of the way in which Mithradates is haughty towards the Galatian tetrarchs, who decide to murder him. Having found out about this plot, the king condemns them all to death, and denies them proper burial. In the last moment, he remembers a young man, whom he manages to save at the last moment, just as the executioner was preparing to carry out his duty. The story then continues thus:

But Eporedorix was executed and his corpse was thrown aside and left unburied, and none of his friends dared come near him. But a woman from Pergamum, who had known the Galatian while he was still alive, took the risk of burying him and performing funerary rites. The guards saw her and brought her before the king. It is said that Mithradates was moved by the sight of her, as she was very young and seemed incapable of doing harm, and all the more so as he found out that the cause of her action was love. So he allowed her to leave, taking the corpse with her for burial, as well as garments and ornaments for this purpose.”¹⁵

¹⁴ δι’ ο μοι κα μάλιστα δοκοσι τνδε τν πλεμον γεσθαι μγαν κα τν π’ ατκ νκην μεγλην νκην καλεν κα τν στρατηγσαντα Πομπιον Μγαν τ δ φων μχρι νν πονομζειν. Appian, *Mithridateios*, 582.

¹⁵ ο δ’ πορηδριξ κατακοπες ταφος ξεββλητο κα τν φλων οδες τλμησε προσελθεν γναιον δ Περγαμηνν γνωσμονν φ’ ρας ζν [τι] τ Γαλτ παρεκινδνευσε θψαι κα περιστελαι τν νεκρν σθοντο δ’ ο φλακες κα συλλαβντες νγαγον πρς τν βασιλ. λγεται μν ον τι κα

This story immediately reminds one of the famous plot of ‘Antigone’. So how does Plutarch’s Mithradates compare to Sophocles’ Creon?

They are both tyrants, and arrogant ones at that. They are both wronged by someone (Mithradates by Eporedorix, Creon by Polyneikes) and take disproportionate measures, by extending their vengeance upon a corpse, thus committing an act of hybris. A young girl intervenes and ignores the terrestrial law in obedience to a higher law (love, in the case of the Pergamenian girl, respect for the divine laws in the case of Antigone). Both girls are apprehended by the guards and presented before the king. Here, however, the two characters diverge. While Creon foolishly insists that his law must be obeyed to the bitter end and condemns Antigone to a painful death, Mithradates instantly empathises with the unnamed girl and decides to rescind his previous order. While in Sophocles’ play Haemon, Creon’s son who is in love with Antigone, commits suicide, in Plutarch’s story he is replaced by the altogether more fortunate Bepolitanos, the beautiful youth saved from the hands of the executioner.

This story is uniquely found in Plutarch, so it is very likely that it is his creation, meant to function as a pastiche of Sophocles and warped in such a way as to deliver at all costs a happy ending. Why did Plutarch choose Mithradates as his tyrant? The collection of stories detailing the courage of women demanded examples taken from history, not myth, so the author found himself compelled to take a myth and drape it in the cloth of history. It seems that in Plutarch’s mind, the closest parallel to Creon that History offered was Mithradates. The departure from the classical model can be explained, I believe, not by some sudden wave of sympathy for the Pontic king, but much more likely by Plutarch’s need to deliver a happy ending, by his desire to see loyalty and love repaid in this world.

This little story thus functions as the Hegelian synthesis of the previous two stances: cruelty and generosity mingle in a quaint literary game.

In very similar fashion to the things discussed above, we hear that Mithradates was a very pious king, but also a man who had no respect for the gods. On the one hand, he is one of the great kings who makes donations to the Temple of Artemis at Ephesos, according to Strabo, and even had a peculiar relation with the divinity. In Plutarch’s *Quaestiones convivales* he miraculously survives lightning and takes, as a consequence, the royal epithet Dionysos. Even more strange, we are informed by Aelian¹⁶ that he was protected by three divine animals, a bull, a horse and a stag. On practical grounds, it seems quite hard to believe in the literality of this guardianship by such animals. If one remembers, however, that the Pontic coinage minted under Mithradates Eupator did, in fact, feature quite prominently the stag and the (winged) horse, one is tempted to think twice before discarding this account as utterly fantastic. What we are dealing with here is most likely a story originating with the Pontic court

πρ□ς τ□ν □ψιν α□τ□ς παθε□ν □ Μιθριδ□της□ ν□ας παντ□πασι κα□ □κ□κου τ□ς παιδ□ σκης φανε□σης□ τι δ□ μ□λλον □ς □ουκε τ□ν α□τ□αν γνο□ς □ρωτικ□ν ο□σαν □πεκλ□σθη κα□ συνεχ□ρησεν □νελ□σθαι κα□ θ□ψαι τ□ν νεκρ□ν □σθ□τα κα□ κ□σμον □κ τ□ν □κε□νου λαβο□σαν. Plutarch, *Mulierum Virtutes*, 259C-D.

¹⁶ Aelianus, *Natura Animalium*, 7.46.

that Mithradates was under the protection of the goddess Ma, the Cappadocian embodiment of the Anatolian Great Mother, who was the mistress of life and death, of fertility and of the hunt. Aelian may have heard the story and remembered only those details spectacular enough for him to include in his zoological treatise.

On the other hand, a number of other authors emphasize that his conduct with regard to the gods was scandalous. Pausanias, for example, insists that his troops plundered many cities and did not spare the sanctuaries, a sacrilege for which his soldiers and himself were severely punished. It is not surprising that he should say that, he, the great lover of all things Greek, who had learned to live under Rome.

Many other examples could be found, of authors freely attributing to Mithradates those qualities or defects which best suited their narrative purposes, but let us proceed to analyse a final dichotomy, and one which could easily function as an umbrella for every other one, that between “dignified king” and “heinous tyrant”.

Many sources praise Mithradates as the embodiment of royal decorum. Thus, Justin, epitomising Trogus, says about him: “later, his grandeur was such that he surpassed in majesty not only the kings of his age, but all the kings who had lived before”¹⁷ and Cassius Dio comments that “Mithradates excelled in every aspect pertaining to kingly duties”¹⁸. The nature of these sympathetic comments in Dio (for this excerpt is by no means singular) may be partly explained by the fact that the author, a native of Bithynia, may have felt somehow proud of his ‘neighbour’. Another explanation might be that in the age when Dio writes (from the time of Caracalla to that of Alexander Severus), the legacy of Alexander the Great and the Hellenistic monarchies which succeeded him was being re-evaluated and finally incorporated in the political universe of Rome. Alexander and his imitators had by now become acceptable role-models for Roman emperors, and this may have prompted Dio to create an idealised portrait of the Pontic king, among whose qualities *virtus* and *maiestas* seem to be quite prominent.

Eupator is said to have surrounded himself with scholars, such as Metrodoros of Scepsis, the Peripatetic philosopher Athenion, the seer Sosipatros and sought the friendship of the doctor Asklepiades of Prusa¹⁹. He was himself passionate about medicine, which at the time was a liberal profession and drew the attention of Galen, who commented on a number of occasions on his proficiency at devising antidotes. One story is quite disturbing, though: “For this Mithridates, much like our own Attalos, sought to acquire practical knowledge of almost every simple medicine to find out which of them could counter poisons, and tried their effects on convicts, whose deaths had been decreed”²⁰. In a post-

¹⁷ *cuius <Mithridatis> ea postea magnitudo fuit, ut non sui tantum temporis, uerum etiam superioris aetatis omnes reges maiestate superauerit.* Justinus, 37.1.7.

¹⁸ σοφ[]τατος [] Μιθριδ[]της []ς π[]ντα τ[] βασιλικ[]. Cassius Dio, 37.12.2.

¹⁹ Plinius Maior, *Naturalis Historia*, 7.124.

²⁰ [] γ[]ρ τοι Μιθριδ[]της ο[]τος []σπερ κα[] [] καθ’ []μ[]ς [] Ατταλος [] σπευσειν []μπειρ[]αν []χειν []π[]ντων σχεδ[]ν τ[]ν []πλ[]ν φαρμ[]κων []σα το[]ς []λεθρ[]οις []ντιτ[]τακται []πειρ[]ζων α[]τ[]ν τ[]ς δυν[]μεις []π[] πονηρ[]ν []νθρ[]πων []ν θ[]νατος κατ[]γνωστο. Galenus, *De Antidotis*, 14.2.

Holocaust world, such disrespect for human beings – whatever their social or racial status – in the name of medical science is nothing short of monstrous, but Galenus seems to comment the incident quite calmly. Clearly, we are dealing here with a semi-mythical account, based entirely on oral tradition, as Mithradates is not known to have written a book about his scientific exploits (unlike, for example, the last of the Attalids, Attalos III Philometor Euergetes). One must be therefore be extremely careful before taking this account at face value and comparing Mithradates with Josef Mengele or other modern monsters. Not only did he contribute to the field of medicine, but also of geography, and receives for it the praise of Strabo,²¹ who includes him in a gallery of civilising heroes.

His championship of Hellenic values is underscored by the accounts of his Crimean campaign. A lengthy inscription (IosPE I², 352), nowadays referred to as the ‘Diophantos inscription’ was set up by the inhabitants of Chersonesus following the successful campaign of this Pontic general against the Scythian barbarians in the Crimean Hinterland, sometime in the last decade of the 2nd century BC. In this text, young Mithradates is portrayed as energetic and animated by generosity, as he leaves no call for help unheeded, even if it comes at a very bad time, at the beginning of winter (v. 18); as a lover of justice, since he punishes the perfidious Pairisades (v. 43); finally, as a great king, crowned by eternal glory after his victory over the Scythians through the agency of the capable Diophantos (vv. 26-7): “and so it came that victory was on the side of Mithradates Eupator, a victory beautiful and worthy of remembrance for all eternity”²². This victory over the Barbarian Scythians who used to oppress the good citizens of the Greek poleis on the Northern shore of the Euxine was not without echo in the literary sources. Thus, Justin praises him for having succeeded where illustrious ancestors had failed: “Thus, he pacified with the greatest success the Scythians, who had hitherto been undefeated, who had destroyed Zopyrion, the general of Alexander the Great, with 30,000 troops, who had butchered Cyrus, the king of the Persians with his 200,000 soldiers, who had put to flight Philip, the king of the Macedonians”²³. Mithradates generally receives a warm treatment from Trogus, and it would be interesting to determine the source he used for this information. One possibility is that his uncle, a cavalry officer in Pompey’s army during his Pontic expedition, may have come into contact with local informants, and he may have passed on the information he had gathered to his nephew. Another possible source is his father, who specialised in the affairs of the East and served under C. Caesar (Augustus’ adopted son, according to Arnaud-Lindet, and not the dictator C. Iulius Caesar). Yet another possibility is that Trogus used a Greek source, having close connections with the Pontic court.

²¹ Strabon, *Geographika*, 1.2.1.

²² συνβα τ νκαμα γενσθαι βασιλε Μιθ[ρ]αδ[ι]ται Ε]π[ι]τορι καλ[ο]ν κα[ι] μν[η]μας [ε]ξιο[υ]ν ε[κ] π[ο]ντα τ[ο]ν χρ[ο]νον. IosPE I2, 352, 26-27.

²³ *Itaque Scythas inuictos antea, qui Zopyriona, Alexandri Magni ducem, cum XXX milibus armatorum deleuerant, qui Cyrum, Persarum regem, cum CC milibus trucidauerant, qui Philippum, Macedonum regem, fugacem fecerant, ingenti felicitate perdomuit.* Justin, 37.3.1-2.

It is again, obvious, that it was entirely to Mithradates' benefit to publicise these stories. If, at the dawn of the Hellenistic Age, it was still possible for a Demosthenes to claim that monarchy was alien to the Greek spirit, by the time of Mithradates, the monarchies stemming from Alexander's empire had become an integral part of the Greek world. Thus, cities were ready to accept as perfectly natural an alliance with a king, provided that the king fulfilled his duties, and we have seen how careful Mithradates was to advertise his generosity, his military abilities, his piety, his love of culture and so on. This activity paid hard, political dividends, for as a result Mithradates could claim alliances not only in Asia Minor, but also in mainland Greece, where Athens welcomed his troops, seen as liberators from the perceived barbarity of the Romans. So successful was he, that Cicero paints an envious picture of his welcome by the Greek cities: "They called Mithridates their lord, their father, the protector of Asia, Euhios, Nysios, Bacchus, their saviour divinity. At one and the same time, while the whole of Asia was closing its doors to consul L. Flaccus, it not only received that Cappadocian in its cities, but it even urged him onwards"²⁴.

This quote from Cicero clearly illustrates the counter-strategy employed by the Romans, i.e. of making sure he is perceived as a barbarian and, even worse, a barbarian tyrant.

Not surprisingly, this view is wholeheartedly embraced by Memnon, whose political motives, namely excusing in front of a Roman audience the conduct of his city during the Mithradatic Wars, have been discussed above. Thus, he describes how cruelly he treated the citizens of Chios, as a result of vulgar personal grudge.²⁵ As a consequence, any self-respecting Greek will abandon his cause as a matter of course: "But Murena took no account of the embassy (after all, even the ambassadors, being Greek and having a philosophical approach to life, disparaged rather than support the cause of Mithradates)"²⁶.

Appian, as mentioned above, paints a portrait of Mithradates in the harsh, saturated tones of Orientalism, with the transparent purpose of glorifying the Roman generals who defeated him. Not only is he cruel, and worships Persian gods, but he is also surrounded by eunuchs and mysterious healers, such as those Agari of Scythian stock who cure him using snake venom.²⁷

Perhaps surprisingly, Mithradates himself may have encouraged representations of himself as a ruler in the Oriental fashion, though in his view this perspective did not exclude, but rather complemented his image of ruler in

²⁴ *Mithridatem dominum, illum patrem, illum conservatorem Asiae, illum Euhium, Nysium, Bacchum, Liberum nominabant. Vnum atque idem erat tempus cum L. Flacco consuli portas tota Asia claudebat, Cappadocem autem illum non modo recipiebat suis urbibus verum etiam ultro vocabat.* Cicero, *Pro Flacco*, 60-61.

²⁵ Memnon, *History of Heracleia*, 23.1.

²⁶ □ δ□ <Μουρ□νας> μ□ θ□μενος τ□ πρεσβε□□ (κα□ γ□ρ κα□ ο□ πρ□σβεις□ □Ελληνες □ντες κα□ τ□ν β□ον φιλ□σοφοι□ τ□ν Μιθριδ□την μ□λλον δι□συρον □ συν□στων) [...] Memnon, *History of Heracleia*, 36.

²⁷ Appian, *Mithridateios*, 88.

the Greco-Macedonian tradition of Alexander. Like his ancestors and like many other kings in the region, he promoted hybridisation between Greek and Achaemenid traditions in almost every aspect, from military affairs, to administration of the kingdom and from marital practices to religious cults. In order to illustrate this drive, I think one example will be particularly useful: the dynastic myth of the Mithradatids. I will use this element precisely because it is a myth, a fiction, and moreover a fiction that evolved over time, reaching its most elaborate form under Eupator himself.

The claims to noble ancestry made by the Pontic house differ widely, depending on the source of information. Thus, some authors credit them with being descended from one of the Seven Wise Persians. Polybios – our most important source for Pontic affairs before the reign of Mithradates Euergetes – falls into this category: “This Mithradates {meaning Mithradates II} claimed to descend from one of the Seven Persians who had killed the Magus and to have preserved his reign of his ancestors, granted to them from the very beginning by Darius in the region of the Black Sea”²⁸ An isolated piece of information from Diodoros seems to imply that this view may have been shared by Hieronymos of Cardia (Diodoros’ most likely source in this part of his work).²⁹

A few Roman authors agree with this pedigree. Thus, Florus, by means of introduction to his summary of the Mithradatic Wars, writes a brief *archaeologia*, making a swift transition from the mythical history of Pontus to the mythologised past and lastly to Eupator himself. The genealogical note agrees with the previous two writers in making one of the Seven Persians the distant ancestor of the founder of the Mithradatid dynasty: “The most ancient king of these nations and regions was Aetes, afterwards Artabazes, a descendant from the Seven Persians, and then Mithridates, the greatest of them all by a large margin”³⁰. The same is true of Aurelius Victor (if, indeed, it was Aurelius Victor who wrote the *De Viris Illustribus*, 71.1).

On the other hand, particularly Latin authors of later times – who lived at the same time as or later than Mithradates Eupator – credit the dynasty with more noble origins. Instead of being descendants merely of Persian aristocracy, they are said to have for ancestor Dareios the Great. For example, this is what Sallustius writes: “Thus obtained the throne Darius, of whose line Artabazes was born, he who is said to have been the founder of the kingdom of Mithradates”³¹. Tacitus³²

²⁸ ὁ δὲ Μιθριδῆτις ἐχρητο μὲν πῦγονος εἶναι τὸν πῦττον Περσῶν ἑνὸς τῶν πανελομένων τῶν μῦγον, διατετηρηκεὶ δὲ τὸν δυναστεῖαν πῦ προγόνων τῶν ἑξ ἑρχῶς ἀποτοχῶς διαδοθεῖσαν πῦ Δαρεῖου παρὰ τὸν Εἰξείνον πόντων. Polybios, 5.43.2.

²⁹ Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliothēke*, 19.40.2.

³⁰ *harum <Ponticarum> gentium atque regionum rex antiquissimus Aetas, post Artabazes, a septem Persis oriundus, inde Mithridates, omnium longe maximus*, Florus, 1.40.

³¹ *Ita Darius regnum obtinuit, a quo Artabazes originem ducit, quem conditorem regni Mithridatis fuisse [...]*, Sallustius, *Historiae*, 2.73.

³² Tacitus, *Annales*, 12.18.4.

says the same thing when referring to one ruler of Bosphorus, Mithridates VIII. His testimony, however, holds good for the Mithradatid dynasty of Pontus as well, as the Bosphorans claimed to be their direct descendants.

Appian also agrees with the more noble ancestry, giving such detailed genealogical information that one is made to believe he had an ‘inside source’: “thus died Mithridates, being sixteenth in line from Darius, the son of Hystaspes, the king of the Persians, and the eighth from that Mithradates who had rebelled against the Macedonians and founded the Pontic kingdom”³³.

How might this discrepancy be explained? The difference is not, obviously, between friendly and hostile sources, nor is it relevant that most Greeks favour one interpretation and most Romans another. In all likelihood, the distinction is to be made between phases of dynastic ideology. In the tumultuous period of the Diadochoi and the Epigonoι, during which the identities of most ruling houses were defined against the background of often mythical ancestries, the version in circulation was more “humble” and this is what Hieronymos of Cardia heard and recorded. Polybios, in mid-second century BC, had access to the same story, passing it on to subsequent writers who used his *Histories* as a source, most notably Titus Livius (if we trust Florus to have faithfully recorded his ideas) and Diodoros (although for this particular piece of information, Diodoros may have drawn directly on Hieronymos of Cardia rather than on Polybios).

By the 1st century BC, however, the more “noble” claim is found in the sources, starting with Sallustius, a claim designed to accommodate the increased importance enjoyed in international politics by the Pontic house and the new scope of its ambitions. Although this later version may have appeared at the time of Mithradates Euergetes, it is more likely to have been disseminated by his more illustrious son, Eupator.

It is interesting to note that one source, Pompeius Trogus one of the sources most sympathetic to Mithradates, records the most noble of the ancestries we have seen so far: “Mithradates traced his ancestry, on his father’s side, to Cyrus and Darius, the founders of the Persian kingdom, and on his mother’s side, to Alexander and Seleukos Nikator, the founders of the Macedonian empire.”³⁴

It is somewhat unclear how the connection between Alexander and the Seleukids was made, given that the children of the Conqueror (Herakles by Barsine³⁵ and Alexander IV by Rhoxane) had been murdered before having offspring of their own. Even more peculiar is the fact that the connection is

³³ □ Μιθριδ□της □π□θνησκειν, □κκαιδ□κατος □ν □κ Δαρε□ου το□ □στ□σπου, Περσ□ν βασιλ□ως, □γδοος δ' □π□ Μιθριδ□του, το□ Μακεδ□νων □ποστ□ντος τε κα□ κτησαμ□νου τ□ν Ποντικ□ν □ρχ□ν, Appianus, *Mithridateios*, 112.

³⁴ <Mithridates> [...] *paternos maiores suos a Cyro Darioque, conditoribus Persici regni, maternos a magno Alexandro ac Nicatore Seleuco, conditoribus imperii Macedonici, referat*, Justin, 38.7.1.

³⁵ If indeed he was his son and not a simple pretender manipulated by politicians far more powerful and cunning than himself.

advertised by “secondary dynasties”, the Mithradatids and the Orontids of Commagene, but not by the Seleukids themselves, who preferred to extol Apollo as ancestor. It is unlikely the connection is to be seen through the Ptolemaic blood brought to the Seleukids by Cleopatra Thea (there had been a previous marital connection between Antiochos II and Berenice Phernephoros, but this blood tie has been severed by the murder of Berenike and her young son). Firstly, the ancestor claimed by Mithradates Eupator is Seleukos, not Ptolemaios. Secondly, Ptolemaios claimed to be the bastard son of Philip II of Macedon, being a blood relation of Alexander, but not his descendent. Thirdly, the last certain tie between the Pontic house and the Seleukids is made through Nysa, daughter of Antiochos IV Epiphanes, wife of Pharnakes I, therefore before the arrival of Cleopatra Thea on Seleukid soil.

A possible solution has been put forward by Tarn, who, while trying to find the propagandistic fundament for the Alexander connection claimed by the Bactrian king Agathocles³⁶ in his “pedigree” coinage, suggests there may have existed a legend which made Apama, Seleukos I’s wife, into the daughter of Alexander and Rhoxane, pointing out that within the space of a few generations chronological asperities of such legends tend to become ignored. It remains curious, however, that such a gratifying legend has the character of a folk tale and is not picked up by the official Seleukid propaganda, but only by collateral dynasties, which used this fabricated ancestry to add another dimension to their dynastic claims and implicitly, to their political ambitions.

We see, therefore, in Mithradates a king who truly spoke all the languages of his subjects, meaning that he tried to adapt his image to fit all their expectations, presenting a Greek face to his Greek subjects and allies and an Achaemenid face to his Oriental subjects and allies.

The legacy of Mithradates beyond Antiquity is no less contradictory. If, up to the 18th century playwrights saw him as the personification of the noble king (we need only remember the libretto of Mozart’s *Mitridate*), in the 19th century German scholars revived the theme of Orientalism and had no qualms calling him a “sultan”.³⁷ However, the Greeks now living in Northern Turkey and their descendants living in exile seem to have kept clear of Momsen and his ilk, because, as they were trying to identify a national hero, i.e. a man who stood up for the cause of civilisation in the face of barbarism, a symbol of their resistance against Turkish oppression, they turned to none other than good old Mithradates. I’m sure that if he could hear about this, he would be very pleased with himself.

³⁶ Since the time of Tarn, scholars have become less sure about Agathocles’ intentions, to the point of doubting any intention of linking himself to Alexander.

³⁷ Latife Summerer, “The Search for Mithridates. Reception of Mithridates VI between the 15th and the 20th centuries”, in Jakob Munk Højte, *Mithridates VI and the Pontic Kingdom*, Aarhus University Press 2009.