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Mitradates VI: Rome's perfect enemy¹

Jesper M. Madsen

King Mithradates VI's charisma and his considerable impact on the history of ancient Asia Minor, the Black Sea area as a whole and the Greek mainland is evident to those who study his life and deeds. Apart from being a successful Hellenistic ruler, Mithradates is often mentioned as the man who resisted Rome for almost thirty years, an effort that has given him significant space in both ancient and modern accounts.

As a young man around 113 BC Mithradates took over the throne from his father, Mithradates V. From his accession to the late 90s BC, Mithradates VI gained *de facto* control of the central and eastern parts of Anatolia, Kolchis and the Crimea as well as the northern and northwestern coast of the Black Sea region. As a result, the territory under Pontic influence moved closer to Roman interests and relations between Rome and the young Pontic king grew more and more tense.

This paper will concentrate on Roman policy in Anatolia and the personal ambition of Roman aristocrats involved in the wars against Mithradates. Based on the narrative and biographical sources, it will be argued that personal agendas in the Roman aristocracy were a significant factor in all three wars and that Mithradates was far more reluctant to wage war on Rome than is usually suggested by modern scholarship. Regardless of the different approaches to Mithradates' life and the history of the Pontic Kingdom, attention has generally focused on the wars between Rome and Mithradates, the so-called Mithradatic Wars. Here the king is generally seen as the aggressive party challenging Rome by conducting a policy which, partly out of hatred and partly out of an ambition to create a large Pontic Kingdom, aimed at a direct confrontation with Rome.²

The role played by Roman aristocrats and generals in stirring up the conflict in Asia Minor has been acknowledged by scholars,³ but the dominant view has been that Mithradates provoked the First War⁴ as a result of an expansionist policy and that he was responsible for the outbreak of the Third War as a response to the Roman inheritance of Bithynia in 74 BC.⁵

A second explanation of the Wars is the idea of Mithradates as a Hellenistic king who challenged Rome in order to liberate the Greek world from Roman rule.⁶ This view tends to see the Pontic king as a representative of Greek culture and thereby emphasises Greek cultural influence in the Pontic Kingdom. Whether Mithradates is seen as a king with imperialistic ambitions or as the protector of Greek culture, he is still generally viewed as the aggressor who challenged the Roman order. This is a point of view that tends to focus mainly on the political agenda in Pontos but at the same time ignores Rome's part in the conflict.

This approach to the conflict has been influenced by the notion of Rome's defensive imperialism, and by the whole idea that, in order to protect her interests in Anatolia or the interests of her allies,

¹ This study was initiated at the time I was employed at the Danish National Research Foundation's centre for Black Sea studies Aarhus University. I am grateful to the foundation and the centre for their help and support I received during the completion of this paper. I would also like to thank Tonnes Bekker-Nielsen and Brian McGing for having read and discussed earlier drafts. All errors are my own.

² Reinach 1895, 294–5; Bengtson 1975, 252.

³ Badian 1958, 289; Glew 1977, 404; Strobel 1996, 145–8.

⁴ McGing 1986, 86.

⁵ McGing 1986, 144–5; Sherwin-White 1994, 233–4.

⁶ Duggan 1974, 9; Antonelli 1992, 7.

Rome was forced to wage wars on a notoriously aggressive Mithradates. The theory of Rome's defensive imperialism was subjected to substantial criticism, first by William Harris's influential contribution *War and Imperialism in Republican Rome 327–70 BC* (1979), and then by the more balanced views of John North's article 'The development of Roman Imperialism' in *JRS* (1980) and later by John Rich's *Fear, greed and glory: the cause of Roman war-making in the middle republic* (1993) and Robert Morstein Kallet-Marx *Hegemony to empire: The development of the Roman Imperium in the east from 148 to 62 B.C* (1995). In spite of these arguments for a more aggressive Roman stance, Rome's role in the Mithradatic Wars is still seen by most commentators as defensive.

It is obvious that Mithradates was not simply a victim of Roman imperialism or personal ambitions. His persistent attempts to turn the balance of power in Asia Minor in his favour by promoting several *coups d'état* in the neighbouring kingdoms, or by repeatedly invading Kappadocia, Paphlagonia and Galatia obviously brought him closer to war with Rome. The aim of this paper is therefore not to minimise Mithradates' role in the wars, but merely to give a more detailed account of the Roman part in the conflict. In this respect it will be argued that Mithradates did not consistently follow an aggressive strategy against Rome or Roman interests in the region, but instead conducted a politics aimed at maximising his influence in Anatolia, without engaging in a military conflict with Rome. This strategy proved to be naïve, but the repeated defensive manoeuvres carried out by Mithradates when Rome was ready to back her demands with force, testify to a reluctance to conduct open war.

Pontic politics before the Mithradatic Wars (113–89 BC)

During his first twenty years as king, Mithradates' influence grew stronger in both Asia Minor and on the Black Sea coast. Immediately after his accession, the Greek colony Chersonesos asked Sinope, then the capital of Pontos, for help against Scythian and Taurian tribes. By sending an army

of about 6,000 soldiers led by Diophantos to rescue the Greek cities, Mithradates was able to extend his influence in the northern Black Sea region. After a number of campaigns on the Crimean peninsula, Pontic forces managed to defeat the Scythians north of Chersonesos and to overcome resistance in the kingdom of Pantikapaion. Like Chersonesos, soon other Greek Black Sea colonies such as Olbia and Apollonia found themselves asking for Pontic assistance. Once more Mithradates helped the Greek cities. Pontic political and military influence was further extended and by the end of the 2nd century BC it included the northern and northwestern part of the Black Sea area and its southern shores from Amastris in the west to Trapezous in the east as well as large parts of Armenia Minor. Mithradates took no direct part in the Crimean campaigns. Instead the different campaigns and the following administration of Crimea he entrusted to members of the Pontic aristocracy.⁷

At the time of Mithradates' accession, the kings of northern and central Anatolia were competing to enlarge and consolidate their kingdom on behalf of their neighbours. After the Seleucid Kingdom had lost its power in the western part of Asia Minor following the war with Rome in 190 BC, and the kingdom of Pergamon had been transformed into the Roman province of Asia sometime during 120s BC,⁸ a new situation emerged in Asia Minor. At first Rome saw no need to enlarge its Asian domains. As Rome had not conquered, but inherited, the Kingdom of Pergamon, there had been no confrontation with potential resistance both within and outside the new province, and the number of Roman soldiers stationed in Asia could not provide the necessary force for a further enlargement.

The unsettled situation in northern and central Anatolia invited minor powers to extend their influence into the vacuum left by the fall of the larger Hellenistic dynasties and by Rome's reluctance to fill it. As a direct result, competition between kingdoms such as Bithynia, Pontos and Kappadokia increased and their effort to gain the upper hand was

⁷ For a more detailed account to Pontic activities in the northern Black Sea Region, see Hind 1994, 139–40.

⁸ Kallet-Marx 1995, 122.

closely tied to the personalities of their kings and their ability to form alliances both inside and outside Asia Minor as well as to navigate in the constantly changing political situation in the region.

Mithradates VI was now the strongest of the Anatolian kings. Not only had he the resources to mount large expeditions in Crimea and occupy pacified areas afterwards, but compared to the king of Bithynia Nikomedes III, Mithradates controlled a larger geographical area and held a superior military force with the ability to recruit troops from much of the Black Sea region as well as from the central and eastern regions of Asia Minor and from the Mediterranean. In contrast to the Bithynian king, whose territory was bordered by Roman Asia on one side and Pontos on the other, Mithradates had the opportunity to expand his kingdom without challenging Roman interests in the region directly. Such manoeuvrability allowed Pontus to maintain a distance from Rome and develop a stronger and more vigorous state. This favourable position played a significant part in the strategy of Mithradates and as his military superiority became more and more obvious Mithradates grew bolder, seeking to include a still larger part of northern and central Anatolia under Pontic rule.

In 107 BC Mithradates enlarged his kingdom further by invading Galatia and Paphlagonia in a joint military action with Nikomedes III. The elimination of Paphlagonia caused Rome to respond by sending an embassy ordering their immediate withdrawal from Paphlagonia. The request was not heeded, both Nikomedes III and Mithradates arguing for their right to the newly won possessions, and the embassy returned to Rome with unfinished business.⁹

Rome's reluctance to back her words with force was presumably a matter of insufficient military power and it has convincingly been argued that Rome hesitated to engage because the Jugurthine and Cimbrian Wars put too much pressure on her military resources.¹⁰ But Rome's reluctance to engage in Paphlagonia in 107 BC would prove to have a strong influence on the policies pursued by the kings in Anatolia, who got the impression that Rome did not have the means or the will to interfere in Anatolian affairs. Bithynia and Pontos kept

their newly won territories and their ambitions grew; as a consequence the competition intensified and became directed towards control of the weakest kingdom of the three – Kappadokia.

By the end of the 2nd century BC, the kingdom of Pontos had long had a significant influence on affairs in the kingdom of Kappadokia, and in many ways they shared a common heritage from Iranian culture. Mithradates V had previously invaded Kappadokia but instead of occupying the kingdom directly he preferred a more indirect control. King Ariarathes VI of Kappadokia was maintained but ruled with the daughter of Mithradates V, Laodike the sister of Mithradates VI, as his queen. At the end of the 2nd century BC, Gordios, a Kappadokian nobleman who was a close associate of Mithradates VI, killed Ariarathes VI.¹¹ The kingdom was then bequeathed to Ariarathes' younger sons, who ruled with Laodike as guardian until 102 BC, at which point Nikomedes III disturbed the balance of power with an attempt to marry Laodike and thereby establish an alliance between Bithynia and Kappadokia.¹²

This agreement was unacceptable to Mithradates; not only did it compromise the alliance between Pontos and Bithynia, but it also placed Mithradates in a situation where he was surrounded by two allied states. Mithradates responded by expelling the Bithynian delegation and reinstating his nephew Ariarathes VII as monarch. Mithradates' plans for Ariarathes did not last long; Justin reports that the Pontic king brought Gordios back into Kappadokia in order to replace Ariarathes with the same Gordios, a move that led to a new war between Kappadokia and Pontos ending with complete Pontic control.¹³

After defeating Ariarathes VII, Mithradates installed his young son as the king of Kappadokia and appointed Gordios as his regent in 101 BC. Once again Rome hesitated to challenge the expansive move of Mithradates. Not until 97 BC, when the

⁹ Just. *Epit.* 37.4.

¹⁰ Hind 1994, 140–1.

¹¹ Just. *Epit.* 38.1; Hind 1994, 141.

¹² Just. *Epit.* 38.1.

¹³ Just. *Epit.* 38.1.

Kappadokian population rebelled against Pontic rule and the Senate listened to Pontic and Bithynian appeals for the right to Kappadokia did the Roman senators interfere and order both kings to withdraw from Kappadokia and Paphlagonia respectively. Nikomedes III and Mithradates both followed the order; Kappadokia was declared free, and at the request of its population, Sulla, at that time governor of Kilikia, installed Ariobarzanes as the king of Kappadokia.¹⁴

The reason why Rome suddenly responded to the Anatolian problem is presumably related to the new opportunity given to the Senate when Nikomedes and Mithradates chose to discuss their rights to Kappadokia in Rome. Rome repeated her demand that Bithynia and Pontos withdraw to the pre-107 BC borders; and with the improved military situation in Europe and Africa Rome could now free up sufficient military resources to put the necessary pressure on Bithynia and Pontos to make them obey.

But the delicate balance of power in Asia Minor was already challenged in 97 BC when the political situation again shifted in favour of Mithradates. His position in Anatolia was improved strongly by an alliance with Tigranes I, the king of Armenia Maior, who married the Pontic princess Kleopatra. Armenia was a significant military power, which provided Mithradates with the possibility of a new territorial enlargement between Pontos and her new ally, thereby improving his military capacity significantly. In 94 BC Mithradates' situation was further strengthened by the death of Nikomedes III, who left Bithynia to his son Nikomedes IV—a successor who was anything but strong.¹⁵ In 91 BC the Italian allies revolted and placed Rome under significant political and military pressure that limited her ability to engage in foreign affairs. Mithradates took advantage of his improved position and made a new attempt to extend Pontic domination in Anatolia. Kappadokia was invaded once more, this time not by Mithradates directly but by Armenia, and in Bithynia, Sokrates, the half brother of Nikomedes IV, conducted a *coup d'état* supported by Pontic troops.¹⁶

Mithradates now controlled the eastern, central and northern part of Anatolia and he had a major

ally in the King of Armenia. The removal of the Kappadokian and the Bithynian kings was directly against Roman interests, and taking into consideration that only a few years earlier Rome had ordered Mithradates to withdraw from Kappadokia, it must have been obvious that Rome could not accept such changes.

Despite Mithradates' choice of approach, in which he did not appear directly involved, he could not seriously have believed that his role would be ignored in Rome. The reason why Mithradates chose 90 BC as the time to take over Bithynia and Kappadokia has generally been associated with the outbreak of the Social War in Italy.¹⁷ Yet, the strategy of relying on Rome's rebellious *socii* was dangerous; the situation could easily change and give Rome the opportunity to concentrate on Mithradates. The king would need intelligence from Italy provided by the *socii*,¹⁸ but even though Mithradates presumably was approached by the Italians,¹⁹ he had no way of telling that the Social War would be as long and harsh for Rome as it turned out to be.

What he might have expected, after all, was that Rome, after losing her Italian allies, would be in a different situation to that she found herself in during the wars waged on Hannibal or Pyrrhos, where the majority of the *socii* remained loyal. To Mithradates who stood outside the conflict, it may have been difficult to understand that far from all *socii* fought to break Rome's dominant role in Italy, but rather to obtain Roman rights.²⁰ If Mithradates only spoke to the separatist movements, like the Samnites, the Social War would easily appear as a war aimed at eliminating Rome and thereby a perfect opportunity to move against Roman interests in Anatolia. Mithradates could have been well informed by the Samnites and other *socii*, but it is likely that the information passed on to Pontos was

¹⁴ Just. *Epit.* 38.2; Plut. *Vit. Sull.* 5.3.

¹⁵ Hind 1994, 142–3.

¹⁶ McGing 1986, 79; App. *Mith.* 2.10; Just. *Epit.* 38.3.

¹⁷ Reinach 1895, 109; McGing 1986, 79; Hind 1994, 144–5; Strobel 1996, 172.

¹⁸ Hind 1994, 144; App. *Mith.* 3.16.

¹⁹ Diod. Sic. 37.2.11.

²⁰ Cic. *Phil.* 12.27; see also Gabba 1994, 105, 118.

aimed at serving the best interests of the separatists. Despite the fact that the kingdom of Pontos was strong in Anatolia, and Rome was under pressure in Italy, Mithradates did not stand firm against the Roman demand for complete withdrawal from Bithynia and Kappadokia. Instead Mithradates followed the Roman commission sent from Rome and even tried to show his goodwill by killing Sokrates.²¹ No doubt Mithradates' policy in Asia Minor did bring him closer to war, but the first Mithradatic War broke out not because Mithradates refused to accept the demands from the Senate, but merely because it was in the interests of the Roman commission to develop the conflict and wage war on the Pontic king.

The Mithradatic Wars in Roman politics

Until the outbreak of the first Mithradatic War in 89/8 BC Mithradates was the assertive power, whereas Rome played a more defensive role responding to Pontic politics. The arrival of the Roman commission marked a change in this strategy. From 90 BC onwards, Roman magistrates and pro-magistrates pursued a policy aimed at confronting Mithradates with a challenge that threatened the very existence of the Pontic Kingdom.

After his reinstatement, Nikomedes IV launched an attack on Pontos and plundered the west-Pontic territory as far as Amastris. According to Appian, it was the members of the Roman commission who pushed Nikomedes into this hostile act, hoping it would enable him to pay them the large reward he had promised for reinstating him.²² The economic motive described by Appian is no doubt a reasonable explanation. The sums promised were most likely substantial and it was essential for the commission members to recover what had been promised before the political situation changed and complicated matters further. However, the question of debt was hardly the only reason why the commission wanted to reopen the conflict between the Anatolian kings. The Bithynian attack on Pontos was probably intended to cause Mithradates to retaliate and thereby provide

an opportunity for the commission to declare war on Pontos.

It has been argued, unconvincingly, that the members of the commission tried to provoke a war with Mithradates in order to provide Marius with the possibility of an eastern command.²³ Marius' interest in a war against Mithradates, which could win back some of his lost popularity, is recorded by Plutarch.²⁴ But it is doubtful whether Marius' popularity in Rome was the reason why the commission members, who admittedly were among Marius' supporters, showed interest in a war on Pontos. If the policy of the commission was intended to provide Marius with a way into the war, the Senate should have been involved when Mithradates reinvaded Kappadokia in 89 BC. The only way Marius could obtain a command against Mithradates was through an appointment given by the Senate; instead the commission chose to attack Pontos without first consulting the Senate, leaving no possibility for Marius to be appointed.

It has been emphasised that the attack was initiated without any ratification by the Senate,²⁵ but it is doubtful whether the Roman commanders actually needed an approval from the Senate before attacking Pontos in 89 BC. The commission was sent to restore the kings of both Bithynia and Kappadokia, which they did without any fighting at first. But when Mithradates reinvaded Kappadokia, he provided the commission with an excuse to wage war on him for having refused to restore Kappadokia. But whether or not the Roman attack was within the limits of the mandate is not really the issue here. By attacking Pontos without consulting the Senate the commission showed that there were no plans to involve Marius. Instead, the commission members' motive was to conquer Pontos, catch Mithradates, confiscate his enormous wealth, and return to Rome victorious. If the commission wanted to avoid the war, in order to ensure the stability in Anatolia they were sent to provide, Nikomedes

²¹ Just. *Epit.* 38.5.

²² App. *Mith.* 2.11.

²³ Keaveney 1982, 78.

²⁴ Plut. *Vit. Mar.* 31.

²⁵ Hind 1994, 144; Strobel 1996, 177.

would hardly have been put under pressure to attack Pontos in the first place.

Mithradates chose initially to cooperate and thus removed the possibility of an armed conflict included in the mandate. The commission therefore needed a hostile act in order to justify a war on Pontos and it is in this respect that the Bithynian raid on west-Pontos is relevant. If a war against Mithradates had been included within the mandate, the commission would have had no need for Nikomedes' attack, but presumably would have attacked without delay and without demanding a Pontic withdrawal from Bithynia and Kappadocia. It has been emphasised that Mithradates was not technically responsible for the invasion of Kappadokia, as the attack was led by his son and the former king of Kappadokia Ariarathes IX.²⁶ This may formally be true but is of little importance in a tense situation. The invasion was led by Mithradates' son and carried out by Pontic troops, and thus gave the commission a *causa belli* provided by the attack on Roman *amici*.

The First Mithradatic War (89–85 BC)

As a response to Mithradates' invasion of Kappadokia, Nikomedes and a joint force of Roman commanders attacked the Pontic kingdom in the year 89 BC.²⁷ Mithradates' military forces, however, turned out to be much stronger than expected: not only did he defeat the invading forces, he also conquered Bithynia and the entire Roman province of Asia.²⁸

Rome declared war on Pontos, but before Roman troops could challenge Mithradates, two more years passed and the war spread from Asia Minor to Rhodes and into Achaia, where a number of Greek city-states led by Athens chose to follow the Pontic King in an attempt to defy Roman rule. The central element in the Greek revolt against Rome was the systematic killing of the Italian population in Asia, where coordinated action between Mithradates and the cities in Asia attempted to exterminate the Roman and Italian minority in the Greek world.²⁹ Despite the gravity of the situation Rome

did not respond until 87 BC, where Sulla after having forced Marius and his supporters to flee Rome, landed a force of five legions on the Greek mainland.

In the following years Sulla overcame resistance in Athens and the Piraeus, defeated the larger Pontic forces in Europe, and made Mithradates sue for peace in 85 BC. The Pontic situation was desperate: Mithradates had lost every battle since the attack on Rhodes and despite the fact that Sulla had been declared *hostis* and a new army led by Fimbia was sent from Rome in order to release Sulla from his command, Mithradates could not take advantage of the Roman dispute. Instead of confronting Sulla, Fimbia's army set out across the Bosphorus and defeated Mithradates on the Asian side. Mithradates was now facing a war on two fronts: he was in a much weaker position than in 89 BC and at great risk of losing his entire kingdom.³⁰

Sulla's interest in continuing the war longer than necessary had also diminished as a result of the new situation in Rome. As a declared enemy of the state his connection to Rome was cut; there was no way of getting reinforcements and a further attack on Mithradates in Asia Minor would have been rash. Had he chosen to carry on the war further he would have had to do so in a situation where his status as *hostis* gave every soldier in the army right to kill him. Sulla was victorious, but he had no way of knowing whether Mithradates was able to raise new forces and continue fighting.

From his time in Kilikia and his role in re-establishing the Kappadokian king in 97 BC, Sulla knew that the administrative structure of Pontos was based not on a civic structure but on castles, which had to be overcome first in order to conquer Pontos. Sulla was probably looking at years of campaigning, and without the necessary support from Italy this could easily prove to be an impossible task. Continuous fighting would unavoidably mean that Sulla risked

²⁶ Strobel 1996, 177.

²⁷ For a detailed treatment of the First Mithradatic War, see Hind 1994, 144–9.

²⁸ App. *Mith.* 4.20.

²⁹ App. *Mith.* 4.22–3.

³⁰ Hind 1994, 160–1.

wearing down his troops before the Pontic problem was solved. But Sulla was also facing the risk of an alliance between Rome and Mithradates, a constellation that would be impossible to resist, especially if Rome was able to control the Fimbrian army.

Even if Sulla proved to be successful in bringing down Mithradates relatively fast it would hardly be without losses, and Sulla would be weakened significantly when turning to his enemies in Italy. Instead of continuing, Sulla made a brilliant political move in accepting Mithradates' request for peace in exchange for significant reparations. In the treaty Mithradates was ordered to withdraw to his pre-90 BC possessions, hand over his fleet, and pay a substantial sum in compensation for Roman losses.³¹

Instead of fighting a dangerous war Sulla was now strengthened economically as well as militarily, and by offering Mithradates friendship with the Roman people he obtained an ally in the east, who originally, before the confrontation with the Roman commission in 90 BC, had tried very hard to avoid war with Rome. As his line of retreat was relatively open, Sulla could now leave a number of officers behind with enough legions to regain Roman control in Anatolia and re-establish the province of Asia while he himself approached Italy and his enemies in Rome with maximum force.

The peace agreement with Mithradates was not a popular decision; while in Anatolia Sulla's legions preferred to plunder Pontos rather than turn to civil war in Italy, and the officers left behind knew that Mithradates was significantly weaker compared to earlier and therefore vulnerable to new attacks. One of the officers who saw a potential in continuing the war with Pontos was Murena, who was left behind to reorganise the province of Asia.³²

The Second Mithradatic War (83–81 BC)

There are a number of similarities between the First and the Second Mithradatic Wars. Both wars were initiated by Roman commanders and in the case of the second war without any ratification from higher authorities.³³ Just as in the events leading up to

the First Mithradatic War, in the second war Mithradates tried to avoid direct confrontation with the Roman army.

In Appian's account of the Second Mithradatic War, it was the ex-Pontic general Arkelaus who persuaded Murena to attack Pontos in 83 BC. According to Appian, Arkelaus informed Murena that Mithradates had not withdrawn from Kappadokia and was constructing a new fleet aimed at Roman interests in Asia Minor.³⁴ As in the first war, instead of responding to a Roman attack with military force, Mithradates sent embassies first to Murena, who refused to acknowledge the agreement between Sulla and Mithradates, and later to Sulla to protest against the violation of the peace.³⁵

In the meantime, Murena overran several Pontic villages and returned afterwards to Phrygia and Galatia with substantial spoils. Here Murena met a Roman envoy, sent to inform him that Mithradates should be left alone. Despite direct orders, Murena reinvaded Pontos, but this time he was met by the Pontic king, who, according to Appian, thought that Murena's attack was part of the official policy in Rome. Mithradates therefore moved out with two armies and defeated the Roman forces, once again gaining control of Kappadokia.³⁶ From a Roman point of view it was a matter of damage control. Once again a Roman envoy was sent to Anatolia to make it clear that Pontos should be left alone and the kingdom of Kappadokia should be re-established.

Appian mentions that Murena was persuaded to attack Pontos, for it is likely that Arkelaus provided Murena with information that made such a move attractive. But it should be taken into consideration that Murena had an interest in stirring up a conflict by challenging Mithradates. Murena had fought

³¹ Hind 1994, 161–2.

³² App. *Mith.* 54.

³³ Murena could not, of course, obtain ratification from the Senate, who, due to the civil war, considered all actions of Sulla and his party illegal. But Murena's attack on Pontos was in direct opposition to the agreement made between Sulla and Mithradates.

³⁴ App. *Mith.* 9.64.

³⁵ App. *Mith.* 9.65.

³⁶ App. *Mith.* 9.65.

successfully under Sulla but had obtained no credit for his efforts. As chief commander only Sulla was acknowledged for the victory and the only one to gain economically and politically from it. Despite his success, Murena was no stronger politically than he was before the war, and serving in Anatolia he was still far away from the political scene in Rome, with a long way to go before reaching important magistracies and pro-magistracies. One way to speed up his career was to defeat Mithradates, who was behind the killing of tens of thousands of Italians as well as the invasion of Roman provinces; another way was to wage war on Pontos and thereby inflict sufficient losses on Pontos to obtain either a triumph or enough booty to strengthen himself economically before returning to Rome.

It was not Murena's intention to make Mithradates resort to the peace treaty. If this had been the case he would hardly have denied its existence when the Pontic embassy referred to the agreement between Sulla and Mithradates. Murena did not meet the Pontic army in direct battle before Mithradates moved out to confront him. Instead Murena's invasion aimed at carrying out raids on Pontic temples. This was presumably not because Murena feared challenging Mithradates directly – he had just defeated the Pontic army and knew it was significantly weakened – but because Mithradates refused to fight. Pontos hardly had anything to gain from such a battle. Fighting Murena, no matter who the aggressor was, could easily reopen a new full-scale war with Rome, in which Mithradates had no interest until he believed it to be the official Roman policy and therefore a matter of survival.

Once again hostilities between Rome and Mithradates were conducted in the interests of Roman officials, who saw the fighting as a way to obtain economic as well as political advancements. The aggressor was again the Roman party: in the second war, as in the first, Mithradates was reluctant to fight back, waiting until the situation threatened the existence of his kingdom.

Scholars have seen the Second Mithradatic War more as a mugging than real warfare, arguing that it was Murena's personal ambition rather than official Roman policy that led to its outbreak.³⁷ This view has recently been challenged for not taking

into consideration the fact that Murena received a triumph³⁸ for his efforts in Pontos – which is taken to indicate that Sulla supported Murena's war unofficially as a reward to the Fimbrian army in recompense for the necessary peace of 85 BC.³⁹

Whether Sulla unofficially approved of Murena's invasions of Pontos will never be clear. The supposition is based mainly on Appian saying that the Roman envoy Calidius spoke with Murena twice: once in public when he ordered Murena to stay out of Pontos and later in private, followed by another attack on Mithradates.⁴⁰ The argument that Sulla wanted to reward the Fimbrian army is not very convincing. The troops regretting the peace were the same legions that fought together with Sulla in Greece, and he would hardly have felt the need to reward the legions sent against him; they were presumably left behind because they could not be trusted in the civil war to come.

Also the reasons for Sulla's official or unofficial support of Murena's attacks seem unclear. It is not clear why Sulla would need to hide his possible support of Murena. If Appian was right and Mithradates did not withdraw completely from Kapadokia, Sulla and Murena had all the reasons they needed to reinvade Pontos. There would have been no need to send envoys back and forth ordering Murena to leave Pontos if Sulla had not thought that Murena's invasion of Mithradates would have to come to an end. Sulla would not need to fool Mithradates, whose protests would gain little attention; nor would anything in Rome force Sulla to support Murena unofficially and thereby accept the humiliation that Murena seemed unwilling to obey direct orders given by Sulla and the Senate. None the less, the Second Mithradatic War was started, like the first, by a Roman invasion without any hostile act by Mithradates. The Third Mithradatic War, on the other hand, was opened by a Pontic attack on Roman Bithynia in 73 BC. The roles had changed: Mithradates was now the one violating the peace.

³⁷ Olshausen 2000, 284–6.

³⁸ Cic. *De imp. Cn. Pomp.* 8; Cic. *Pro Mur.* 11.

³⁹ Mastrocinque 1999, 97–9.

⁴⁰ Mastrocinque 1999, 97–9; App. *Mith.* 9.65.

The Third Mithradatic War (73–66 BC)

In the scholarly debate it is generally accepted that Mithradates made the first hostile move when in the early spring of 73 BC he invaded Kappadokia and soon afterward the Roman province of Bithynia. The invasion was well planned and a large number of coins had been struck in order to pay the Pontic army.⁴¹

The province of Bithynia provided Rome with full control of the entire west coast of Asia Minor as well as both Propontis and the Bosphorus, which limited access to the Mediterranean Sea. This situation is often said to have been intolerable to Mithradates, who attacked Bithynia in order to free the Black Sea from Roman control.⁴² It is however questionable, whether this is a correct observation. Roman Bithynia no doubt posed a threat to Mithradates: Roman troops were now much closer to the Pontic ports and the Pontic interior could be reached much faster than before. But the question is whether the military situation had changed substantially as a result of Bithynia's new status. Since the accession of Nikomedes IV, Rome had had a significant influence on Bithynian affairs, and the critical situation regarding the straits was in no way new. Even if an autonomous Bithynia would ensure free passage through the Bosphorus, the Propontis would still be under Roman control, as it had been since 133 BC when Rome inherited the kingdom of Pergamum.

It is, therefore, reasonable to question whether it was Bithynia's new status as a Roman province that caused Mithradates to invade Bithynia. Another explanation of the invasion in 73 BC is Mithradates' hatred and his desire to overrun Bithynia; the death of Nikomedes is not seen as the immediate reason for the war but as the factor that forced Mithradates to act and thereby prevent Rome from filling the political vacuum in Bithynia.⁴³ These two explanations are not essentially different. In both cases Mithradates is seen as the aggressor who reopened the war either to extend his kingdom or to oppose Roman influence in Asia Minor. Rome's part in the conflict is largely ignored and

what Rome or her political elite could gain from keeping the conflict in Asia Minor open is never discussed.

A more convincing explanation for the outbreak of the Third Mithradatic War is to be found in the political situation in Rome, where the competition for military success intensified after the death of Sulla. Appian and Plutarch do not mention Rome's inheritance of Bithynia as a reason for Mithradates' attack on Bithynia,⁴⁴ but focus instead on the political situation in Rome as a significant factor in the outbreak of war. In his imaginary reproduction of Mithradates' speech to his soldiers, Appian let Mithradates accuse the Romans of rejecting peace due to greed among the Roman aristocracy.⁴⁵ That Roman greed was responsible for the Third Mithradatic War fits well with Appian's own opinion, but he is in no way alone in this view. In his biography of Lucullus, Plutarch cites Lucullus' and other aristocrats' desire for wealth and power as the main reason why peace between Rome and Pontos was not restored.⁴⁶

Shortly after the death of Sulla, Lucullus was made consul along with Marcus Cotta, about the hundred and seventy-sixth Olympiad. Many were now trying to stir up anew the Mithradatic War, which Marcus (Cotta) said had not come to an end, but merely to a pause. Therefore when the province of Cisalpine Gaul was allotted to Lucullus, he was displeased, since it offered no opportunity for great exploits. (Translation by B. Perrin)

When Sulla died in 78 BC a new war on Pontos moved closer. The treaty of Dardanos was never ratified by the Senate and existed only as a private agreement between Sulla and Mithradates. Mithradates tried to ratify the treaty several times by send-

⁴¹ McGing 1986, 139; 1995, 283–8; de Callatay 1997, 341.

⁴² Ballesteros Pastor 1996, 217; Sherwin-White 1994, 233–4; Olshausen 1978, 432; Reinach 1973, 315.

⁴³ McGing 1986, 144–5.

⁴⁴ McGing 1986, 144.

⁴⁵ App. *Mith.* 10.70.

⁴⁶ Plut. *Vit. Luc.* 5.1.

ing embassies to Rome but never succeeded. Sulla did not ratify the treaty because apparently Mithradates had not withdrawn completely from Kappadokia, and by the time Mithradates next applied, Sulla had died in the meantime. There was no desire for peace in Rome. According to Appian, the Pontic embassy was never received by the Senate or the consuls and returned to Pontos without a peace agreement.⁴⁷ In Rome the aristocracy prepared for war, and the competition over the Pontic command is well illustrated in Plutarch's *Life of Lucullus*, which relates that during Lucullus' consulship in 75 BC he was allotted Gallia Cisalpina as his proconsular appointment, but he managed, with help from politically influential friends, to change his appointment for a Pontic command.⁴⁸ Marcus Cotta, the other consul of 75 BC, was allotted the new province of Bithynia and accordingly tried to persuade the Senate that the war on Mithradates had never ended, but was only temporarily halted.⁴⁹ The rhetoric among the Roman aristocracy, their eagerness to obtain commands against Pontos, and the rejection of the Pontic embassy could only be conceived as a declaration of war. Lucullus left Italy with three legions and added two others when arriving in Asia and Cotta had left for Bithynia with a larger fleet. By her actions, Rome made it clear not only that the agreement between Sulla and Mithradates was no longer valid but also that the commanders were selected and war was on its way.

During the spring of 73 BC Mithradates responded by invading Bithynia and defeating Cotta in Kalkedon. Mithradates knew the vital importance of the straits and moved to capture the Asian harbour town of Kyzikos, which would provide him with full control over the Propontis. Kyzikos held out and Lucullus blockaded the Pontic lines of supply, forcing Mithradates to give up the siege and flee into central Asia Minor. Lucullus followed Mithradates, but in spite of a generally successful campaign he never managed either to capture Mithradates or expel him from the region. As a result, Pompey released Lucullus from his command in 66 BC and managed to drive Mithradates out the same year.⁵⁰

Whether it was the Pontic attack on Bithynia or the Roman military movement against Pontos that marked the outbreak of the war is a matter of defi-

nition. But it seems relatively certain that Lucullus had obtained his command against Mithradates and was in Asia Minor with a total of five legions before Mithradates attacked Bithynia and Asia. It has been argued that Rome moved against Pontos because of the Pontic mobilisation in Paphlagonia as well as his alliance with Sertorius in Spain, which not only provoked Rome but also made war inevitable;⁵¹ this opinion entirely disregards the fact that Rome had previously refused to ratify the peace treaty and in no way acted as if she was ready to offer peace.

As in the two previous wars, Roman aristocrats had the most to gain from an armed conflict with Pontos. After the death of Sulla the competition for magistracies and extraordinary commands was again open. Candidates with impressive military credentials and substantial economic means to conduct a policy popular among the Roman plebs could very well obtain a favourable position on the political scene in Rome.

Roman motives and Mithradatic ambitions

Since competition for political success in late Republican Rome depended increasingly on the candidate's ability to find sympathy among the *urban plebs*, the need for extensive economic resources and successful military records became essential in the consular election.⁵² As a result, the competition for commands against foreign powers was heavily intensified and members of the Roman aristocracy became still more creative in their attempts to stir up new wars to wage. As a powerful and charismatic king controlling a large part of the Black Sea territory with several frontiers with Roman areas of interest, Mithradates provided the necessary threat, wealth and prestige to make him the ideal opponent

⁴⁷ App. *Mith.* 10.67.

⁴⁸ Plut. *Vit. Luc.* 6.

⁴⁹ Plut. *Vit. Luc.* 5.1.

⁵⁰ For a detailed treatment of the Third Mithradatic War, see Sherwin-White 1994, 233–9.

⁵¹ McGing 1986, 144–5.

⁵² Harris 1979, 17.

for Roman aristocrats. A victorious campaign in Pontos would make the Roman commander very popular and very rich, thus improving his chances in Roman politics significantly. The political situation and personal ambitions in Rome are therefore not to be underestimated as an essential factor in the reasons why war repeatedly broke out between Rome and Pontos.

Several times in the late Republican Period Anatolia became the theatre of war which provided Roman commanders with the necessary triumphs, wealth and prestige to strengthen their political position at home. Thus Sulla used the fleet and wealth as a means to conduct his takeover of the capital. Murena obtained a triumph from the Second Mithradatic War at an early point in his career, and Pompey managed, with help from Caesar and Crassus in the first triumvirate, to position himself as one of Rome's most influential men.

The specific potential of the Mithradatic Wars might not, at least in the beginning, have been obvious to most Roman aristocrats, but it seems convincing that Roman politicians were aware of the political value of leading successful commands and that this expectation led to greater reluctance to make peace with Pontos. According to Plutarch, Lucullus rejected Gallia Cisalpina because it was too peaceful a province with few opportunities for great exploits, suggesting that the desire for wealth and power was a general character trait not just for Lucullus but also for the entire Roman aristocracy.⁵³ In this treatment of the Mithradatic Wars, personal ambitions and the desire for wealth, power and prestige are viewed as the main reason why Roman commanders, from Cassius and Aquilius in the Roman commission of 89 BC to Pompey, waged war on Pontos.

It is true that Rome's politics and general behaviour are the object of substantial criticism in both Plutarch's and Appian's accounts of the Mithradatic Wars. As members of the Greek intellectual elite their view of Roman Imperial policy has been seen as a critique of the moral and primitive lifestyle of the Roman aristocracy.⁵⁴ But a similar view that greed and political ambitions were responsible for the wars on Pontos is also found in the works of Sallust, who in a fictive reproduction of a letter had

Mithradates ask the Parthian King to join Pontos in the war against Rome.⁵⁵

In fact, the Romans had one inveterate motive for making war upon all nations, peoples and kings: a deep-seated desire for dominion and riches. (Translation by J.C. Rolfe)

This criticism is probably related to Sallust's unsuccessful career, which was brought to an end after Caesar's death and allegations of provincial misgovernment.⁵⁶ His approach to Roman Imperial policy is therefore, like that of Appian and Plutarch, coloured by a general mistrust of the Roman aristocracy. But Sallust's, admittedly, brief contribution to the historical treatment of the Mithradatic War shows that the view of Roman responsibility was not a Greek phenomenon, but one found among members of the Roman elite a few years after Pompey had defeated Mithradates.

The view of Mithradates as a king with ambitions for a kingdom including the entire northern and western part of Anatolia and thereby the Roman province of Asia, is well embedded in the sources: in Sallust's Mithradatic letter, for instance, in which the king sees himself as the saviour of all Greeks;⁵⁷ or in Plutarch's *Lives of Lucullus*, which states that Mithradates was received as a liberator when he invaded Bithynia and caused Asia to reject their Roman *publicani*;⁵⁸ or in the account of Memnon and in Justin's epitome of Pompeius Trogus, where Mithradates is said to have had the invasion of Asia planned since his early reign.⁵⁹

Mithradates' political manoeuvres nevertheless leave a different impression. It is true that several times, due to his repeated invasions of Cappadocia, he was on the brink of war with Rome. But it is interesting to note that every time Rome was willing to back her demand with force Mithradates

⁵³ Plut. *Vit. Luc.* 5.1.

⁵⁴ Swain 1996, 156, 250.

⁵⁵ Sall. *Letter of Mithridates* 5.

⁵⁶ Büchner 1982, 19–20.

⁵⁷ Sall. *Letter of Mithridates* 11.

⁵⁸ Plut. *Vit. Luc.* 7.5.

⁵⁹ Just. *Epit.* 38.3; Memnon *Testimonium* (FGrH 434) 22.

complied unconditionally. If the conquest of all Asia Minor had been a central issue to Mithradates before the outbreak of the First Mithradatic War, a more aggressive policy towards Rome should have been expected. Instead Mithradates chose to withdraw from both Kappadokia and Bithynia even though Rome was at her weakest point in many years. The fact that Mithradates withdrew to avoid war and even tried to cover up his engagement in Bithynia and Kappadokia by using Nikomedes' half-brother and the Armenian King as puppet rulers indicates that a full scale war against Rome was hardly Mithradates' intention, at least not before he gained full control of Asia Minor due to his unexpected success.

Mithradates' policy towards Rome was defensive and responsive to the hostile moves made by changing Roman magistrates. This defensive strategy is particularly clear in the first two wars which opened with Roman attacks on Pontos. In 73 BC it was Mithradates who took the initiative for war when Roman Bithynia was invaded. But political circumstances in Rome as well as substantial movements of Roman troops into Asia Minor left it obvious that war would soon be a reality. Rome's intention of waging a new war on Pontos was further underlined by the attempt among aristocrats to obtain commands and promagistracies in the provinces bordering on Pontos.

Even though the political situation in Rome may be considered as the main reason for the continuous wars, Mithradates should not be regarded as a victim. Mithradates had, or more correctly acquired, ambitions which involved the province of Asia. After defeating the Roman commission, he chose to carry on his campaign and expel Rome from much of Asia Minor. It was hardly a great military effort – Roman forces in Asia had been used in the previous attack on Pontos, and the western part of Asia Minor was presumably relatively unprotected. But by invading Asia and by carrying out the slaughter of the Italians in the Ionian cities Mithradates made war unavoidable.

The relatively easy victory against the Roman forces made the Pontic King bold regarding his own strength and therefore attractive to anti-Roman movements in the Greek mainland and Asia Minor,

who saw Mithradates as offering an opportunity to escape Roman rule.⁶⁰ It is, however, important not to overestimate Mithradates' ambitions or the Greek view of him as a liberator before his obvious success at the beginning of the First Mithradatic War. It is likely that at some point Mithradates saw himself as the natural ruler of a united Asia Minor and the king who freed the Greek World from Roman hegemony, as written by Sallust and Plutarch, but it is just as convincing that these ambitions emerged gradually as Pontic control grew stronger in Asia Minor, and not as a motive for fighting the First Mithradatic War in the first place.

Mithradates' aim was instead to make Pontos the strongest kingdom in Anatolia, strong enough to match Rome not as a world power but as an Anatolian state. With the Bithynian *coup d'état* and the invasion of Kappadokia in 91 BC, Mithradates tried to extend his control within Asia Minor. This move has been seen as an attempt to provoke a Roman attack on Pontos and place her in the role of the aggressor.⁶¹ Mithradates undoubtedly conducted a policy which brought him closer to a war with Rome but there is no reason to claim that the attack on Roman Asia was the first example of an expansive policy carried out by Mithradates.⁶² On the other hand, to view Roman policy in Anatolia during the late Republic as a defensive response to Mithradates' ambitions is hardly different from the earlier perceptions of Roman imperialism as defensive, and it leaves Roman motives and personal ambitions among the aristocracy unaccounted for. The only reason why Mithradates could have wanted Rome to take the role as the aggressor was if he needed to justify the war somewhere. But it is difficult to see how such justification would be helpful. In the wars between the Anatolian kings it was common policy to convince Rome of the legal right behind hostile moves and invasions. But if Mithradates wanted to stand firm in Bithynia and Kappadokia in 89 BC no justification would have mattered in Rome, and it is difficult to see how

⁶⁰ Just. *Epit.* 38.3; App. *Mith.* 3.21.

⁶¹ McGing 1986, 86.

⁶² Strobel 1996, 184.

a defensive policy could alter the way in which other Hellenistic states viewed the conflict.

If Mithradates had plans for a war to destroy Roman rule in Asia Minor and the Greek world in the late 90s, it is difficult to see why he chose not to take advantage of the situation and overrun Bithynia and Kappadokia with his own army and secure important strategic positions or use his own army in a direct attack on Roman Asia. The only reason why Mithradates would have withdrawn from strategically important territories was if he was trying to avoid war with Rome, for to do so would be to grant the Roman army unnecessary advantages. What he did try, however, was to maximise his influence in Anatolia at a time when Rome was weakened by war in Italy, presumably expecting that Rome, as in 107 BC, would be too occupied to turn on Pontus; or perhaps he even hoped that Rome would come out of the war considerably weakened and unable to maintain her dominant position in Asia Minor in the future.

Conclusion

Mithradates was not simply an abused victim of Roman imperialism. Moving against Bithynia and Kappadokia was surely an attempt to exploit Rome's weakened position under the Social War. The king thereby pursued a strategy that deliberately challenged Roman interests in the region and thereby is responsible for pursuing a policy that would bring Pontus on the brink of a war with Rome. The aim of this paper has therefore not been to diminish Mithradates' part in the conflict but to focus on the role Roman aristocrats played in the outbreaks of

the three Mithradatic Wars. There has been a consensus in modern scholarship to see Mithradates as the man responsible for the outbreak of the Wars with Rome; either because he aimed to include the Roman province Asia in his kingdom or because he hated the Romans for interfering in Anatolian affairs. Mithradates is likely to have hated Rome just as he may have developed a desire to add Asia to his domains, but it is important to note that he tried to avoid direct military confrontation in the first two wars and tried to ratify the peace agreement made with Sulla before the outbreak of the third war. It is also essential to note that Mithradates chose to redraw when the Roman commission ordered him to do so in 89, thereby giving up the strategically important Bithynia. This decision further supports the notion that Mithradates tried to avoid war. Roman aristocrats, on the other hand, were keen to engage Pontus and Mithradates. The members of the commission forced Nikomedes IV to attack Pontus in 89, Sulla and Marius fought over the command against the king and started the first civil war in Rome, Murena attacked Pontus after Sulla had left, Lucullus managed to change his allotted province Gallia Cisalpina to a command in Asia Minor, and Cotta argued persistently that the war with Pontus was not over but put on hold. Rome was neither passive nor defensive. Senators, consuls or promagistrates played a key role in the outbreak of all three of the Mithradatic Wars and took the initiative to attack Pontus in the first two. Mithradates started the 3rd war by attacking what was now Roman Bithynia but not until Rome had refused to ratify the peace agreement and send a large army into Asia Minor.

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