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Military Threat or Political Tool: An Examination of Mithridates VI Eupator of Pontus as a Threat to the Roman Republic from 88-63 B.C.

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**Military Threat or Political Tool: An Examination of Mithridates VI Eupator of
Pontus as a Threat to the Roman Republic from 88-63 B.C.**

submitted to
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and
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Abstract

This paper is an examination of how much of a military and diplomatic threat Mithridates VI Eupator of Pontus truly posed to the Roman Republic during the Mithridatic Wars from 88-63 BC. This question was posed due to the seeming disconnect between how Mithridates is portrayed in primary sources compared to the results of his military encounters with the Romans. This examination was performed with the use of numerous primary sources from the time period as well as secondary, scholarly sources pertaining to the motivations and actions of both Mithridates and contemporary Roman personages. The conclusion arrived at was that Mithridates was portrayed by Roman historians as being far more imposing than he truly was, which is supported by his lack of military success against the armies of Rome in their encounters. The reasons for this are Mithridates being used as a means for political ascension within the Roman social sphere by characters such as Sulla, Lucullus, and Pompey. Thus this paper examines how propaganda and political ambition can result in exaggerations and incomplete information being presented in historical accounts.

Chapter I

Who Was Mithridates?

The last two centuries BC were an extremely turbulent time for the Roman people, as the republic transitioned to empire through a period of civil war and strife. The complex relations between some of Rome's greatest characters (such as Caesar, Cicero, and Pompey) tend to dominate this narrative, and the numerous sources detailing the events of the civil wars reflect this. However, during this period there were numerous

intriguing struggles between Rome and her enemies abroad that tend to be overlooked. One example of this is the Mithridatic Wars, a series of three struggles from 88-63 BC between the Roman Republic and the Kingdom of Pontus, an Eastern-Hellenistic Kingdom located along the Black Sea.

The central player in these struggles was one of Rome's most intriguing enemies, Mithridates VI Eupator. A man of mixed Greek-Persian heritage who claimed descent from both Alexander and Darius the Great, Mithridates is a fascinating historical character both for the mythos that surrounds him, but also for his ability to survive and continue fighting and resisting the military might of Rome for decades. While the historical accuracy his character is a matter of debate, the acts and nature of Mithridates the Great captivated the attention of both writers of the ancient world, as well as being the subject of numerous plays, novels, and poems from the Middle Ages to present day. So before delving in to the intriguing struggles between Mithridates and the Roman Republic it will be useful to evaluate, to the best of our ability, just who Mithridates was, or at least how he was perceived.

The only information available regarding Mithridates' early life comes from the Roman historian Justin,¹ and it reads like something out of a fable. In the year he was born, 135 BC, a comet allegedly raced across the Pontic skies, which coincided with a prophecy that foretold the coming of a savior-king. His father, Mithridates V, ruled the Pontic Kingdom until 120 BC, when he was assassinated by means of poison. After his death, Pontic rule was transferred to Mithridates' mother Laodice VI, who favored his

¹ Justin *Epitome of the Philippic History of Pompeius Trogus* Book XXXVII

younger brother over him. Due to this lack of favor, accounts say that Mithridates was always suspicious of assassination attempts. When he would go riding, he always seemed to be given “a resistive horse” with a history for injuring its rider. He was also extremely paranoid of assassination attempts by means of poison, because of his father’s death, and because of this began experimenting with poisons and remedies for them, which would lead to an extremely unique aspect of his character that will be discussed later.

At the age of 14, with the constant threat of assassination surrounding him, Mithridates supposedly left with a group of friends into the Pontic mountains. Here he is told to have lived in the forests with his companions, living off the land and becoming acquainted with the different peoples of his kingdom. Justin says he lived here for a period of seven years, however other estimates state the time spent away as being closer to four. The exact nature of his return to the throne is not detailed in extant sources, however in around 116 BC Mithridates returned to Sinope, the capital of Pontus, deposing his mother and taking the crown for himself.

The notion that these stories surrounding his upbringing were at the very least exaggerated are supported by how careful Mithridates was in cultivating his image. Along with his claimed royal descent, he went to great efforts to promote a larger-than-life characterization of himself.² He was said to have worn his hair in the long, flowy style of Alexander, a deliberate decision as the coins he minted of himself depict him in the same fashion as the Macedonian conqueror. Unlike other Hellenistic monarchs though, he also celebrated his Persian roots as well. He is said to have favored wearing

² B.C. McGing *The Foreign Policy of Mithridates VI Eupator King of Pontus* (Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1986), 101.

the attire of Persian nobility, tunics and baggy trousers, which would have appeared strange in the Greek East, but would have certainly added to the sense of royalty that accompanied his image.

Physically Mithridates is described as being very imposing, never being idle and always exercising. He would openly challenge men in all competitions of physical excellence, besting them in “running, riding, or trials of strength”. Intellectually he was raised in both the traditional Hellenic fashion, but also was educated in manners of Persian culture and religion. A common thread in ancient accounts regarding his character is his extreme intelligence and cunning, which could certainly be in part because of the rigorous nature of his intellectual upbringing.

Another aspect of his education, which led to cultivating one of the most interesting aspects of Mithridates’ nature, was being taught botany. This helped foster an interest in natural medicine, stemming partly from his fear of assassination by means of poison, which resulted in Mithridates being known as a master of the natural sciences. Pliny the Elder describes him as “being more attentive investigator of life’s problems than any of those born before him.”³ Known for consuming small doses of poison in order to build an immunity against it, Mithridates also cultivated an antidote for poisoning, known as *Mithridate*, which was greatly-desired in the ancient/medieval world, although if it indeed existed its ingredients are lost to us today.

Thus the portrait we find of the Pontic King is a colorful one. A multi-cultural king of imposing physical nature, who was both brilliant on the battlefield and off.

³ Pliny *The Natural Histories* Book XXV Ch. III

However, with such larger-than-life descriptions, yet so few sources still extant to support these claims, much of current scholarship surrounding Mithridates seems to examine the validity and purpose of these portrayals. His portrayals in ancient writers' works (Plutarch, Appian, etc.) seem to either describe him through an anecdotal, not strictly historical lens, or merely describe the chronological events within which he took part. The nature of the Mithridatic Wars are also generally described in binary terms, describing Mithridates as either the bloodthirsty aggressor, or the unfortunate victim of Roman imperialism. Thus modern scholarship seeks to answer two questions: how much of the mythic nature of Mithridates is truly substantiated, and whether or not the role he played during the struggles with Rome were truly that of the aggressor.

Modern Scholarship

Despite Mithridates' recent rise in popularity as a scholarly topic, modern scholarship pertaining to Mithridates is sparse. This is probably a response to the one-dimensional nature of the primary sources referencing the Pontic King, but nonetheless it isn't a robust literature. Two colorful biographies of Mithridates have been written, the most comprehensive, and most recent of these is *The Poison King* by Adrienne Mayor (2010). A captivating read, *The Poison King* is a more-even handed account of Mithridates' character, however it often takes creative leaps in order to fill in the blanks of his historiography, which can sometimes paint a picture that while very colorful, is

unsupported explicitly by ancient accounts. These instances often occur whenever Mayor is discussing the intermediate events between more major events such as battles, etc. where Mayor comments on what would've occurred based on her interpretation of Mithridates' motivations. Thus *The Poison King* functions more primarily as a popular biography than a strict historical account of who Mithridates was. The second of these biographies is *King of Pontus: The Life of Mithridates Eupator* by Alfred Duggan (1959). Similar to *the Poison King*, Duggan's biography does its best to fill in the historical blanks, however the book's academic merits are undercut by dated language and stereotypes, often referring to Mithridates as a typical "Oriental" monarch or an "Asiatic Barbarian" where he refers to him as an "Asiatic barbarian".

The most helpful examination of Mithridates in modern scholarship comes in the form of *Mithridates VI and the Pontic Kingdom* (2009), a series of papers published by The Danish National Research Foundation's Centre for Black Sea Studies. These papers tackle issues ranging from the nature of Mithridates' administration in Pontus, to his culpability in the Mithridatic Wars. Within, are interpretations that view Mithridates and the Romans as equally at fault in the struggle, each with their own faults and ambitions at play. Such interpretations are helpful in that they deviate from the black and white, and generally unfavorable, representations that can be seen in most primary sources concerning him.

Beyond these however, recent examinations of the Pontic king become sparse. An intriguing perspective on how Mithridates deftly used propaganda and strategic alliances during his rule is displayed in *The Foreign Policy of Mithridates VI Eupator King of*

Pontus by M.C. McGing (1986). This text thus creates a more comprehensive view of Mithridates' actions in the wars and the potential motives behind them. A companion text to this is *Roman Foreign Policy in the East: 168 BC-AD 1* by A.N. Sherwin-White (1983), which analyzes Roman motives in the region and allows for a more complete picture of the designs held by both sides in the conflict. Beyond these, surveys of Roman involvement in the Hellenistic East at that time such as *The Hellenistic World and the Coming of Rome* by Erich Gruen (1984) and the *Greek World after Alexander: 320-30 BC* by Graham Shipley (2000) can prove useful in both bolstering the chronological narrative in the region at the time as well as better understanding the Roman response. However, considering that most of these surveys draw on the same ancient sources, new insights regarding Mithridates are few and far between.

Primary Sources

Primary sources that mention Mithridates help create an interesting picture of the king. The ancient historians all seem to give credit to Mithridates' prowess as a commander and strategist, however most of them lend themselves to one dimensional portrayals in regards to his character. One of the earliest accounts of Mithridates is found in the writings of Cicero, such as Cicero's *Pro Lege Manilia*. In this oration designed to convince the Roman people that Gnaeus Pompeius (Pompey the Great) should be granted sole command of the armies opposing the Pontic King. The speech entails a biting account of Mithridates, describing him as a vicious, anti-Roman scourge that must be

brought to retribution for his terrible crimes committed against the Roman people. However, considering that this was spoken early in Cicero's career, when he was clearly attempting to gain the notice and favor of Pompey, casts doubt into how much of the speech is historical fact and how much of it is designed for maximum political ascension.

A later account given by Pliny the Elder provides an extremely favorable description of Mithridates in the *Natural Histories*. While not providing much in terms of historical narrative, Pliny instead focuses on the academic merits of Mithridates. He states Mithridates was "the greatest king of his time"⁴ and having a "brilliant intellect and wide range of interests". Pliny also claims Mithridates to have spoken 22 languages, and never having to use an interpreter in the entirety of his reign. Thus, although this account does not entail analysis of Mithridates political actions, which draw the most ire, it still praises him and his nature as one of an extremely intelligent renaissance man.

The most prominent of primary depictions is found in Appian's Roman History, which gives an account of the entirety of the Mithridatic Wars. While some call into question Appian as a historian, his account of Mithridates is the most colorful. He is critical of the Romans' role in the wars, painting the Pontic King as a victim of Rome's defensive imperialism whose hand was forced into conflict. However, his depiction of the king is not all positive, as he also acknowledges the cruel nature of Mithridates, whose paranoid nature led him to slaughter many, including numerous members of his own family. Concerning the early years of Mithridates one account remains: Justin's *Epitome of the Philippic History of Pompeius Trogus*. Thus it is a summary or description of the

⁴ Pliny *The Natural Histories* Book XXV Ch. III

now lost history written by Pompeius Trogus. Much like Appian's History however, Justin's account of Mithridates' youth is anecdotal, and the veracity of Justin's account are in question.

Other primary sources available are less vibrant, but more historically founded. Plutarch's *Lives of Sulla, Pompey, and Lucullus*, Velleius Paterculus's *History of Rome*, and Livy's *Histories* all provide a similar historical thread pertaining to the Mithridatic Wars, within which small instances discuss the character of the Pontic monarch. Paterculus describes Mithridates as a man "about whom one cannot speak except with concern nor yet pass by in silence"⁵. He lauds Mithridates exceptional bravery and military prowess, however is critical of his propensity for brutality and notes that that he is second in hatred towards the Romans only to Hannibal. Plutarch also holds a negative view of Mithridates, which is displayed in perhaps the most interesting moment in his writings regarding Mithridates, the peace-meeting between Sulla and Mithridates. The account is perhaps the most interesting because it is the event in which the personality of Mithridates is detailed most vividly.⁶ In this account, he describes Mithridates as being base, unjust, and submissive to the will of Sulla; he describes not only the barbaric actions of Mithridates previous but also comments on his lack of understanding regarding methods of negotiation.

Historical Background of Mithridates

⁵ Velleius Paterculus Roman History ch. XVII

⁶ Plutarch *Lives Sulla* ch. XXX-XIV

Another matter of importance which needs to be fleshed out before examining the true impact of Mithridates on the Roman Republic is the historical background of the region and the ensuing wars that took place within them. A reasonable starting place is Rome's war with Antiochus III fought from 192-188 BC. Another ambitious, Hellenistic monarch reigning over the successor Seleucid Kingdom, Antiochus III had been on strained relations with the Roman Republic in preceding years with actions taken such as welcoming the famous Roman enemy Hannibal into his court. The conflict became direct when Antiochus ventured into mainland Greece following the removal of Rome's troops from the region. Roman legions were then re-deployed in the region, and war ensued. The conflict was a decisive one in the Romans' favor. After defeats at Thermopylae and Corycus in 191 BC, Antiochus was pushed firmly back into Asia Minor. Eventually he sued for peace after another decisive defeat at Magnesia, and the treaty of Apamea was established in 188 BC. This treaty drove Antiochus out of the region, but more importantly ceded all of his land in Anatolia to Eumenes II king of Pergamon, Rome's ally in Asia Minor.

This treaty played a pivotal role in ensuing Roman actions in Asia Minor, because after nearly sixty years of little Roman involvement in the region the Pergamonese king Attalus III bequeathed his kingdom to the Romans following his death in 133 BC. Despite being hesitant to establish an official foothold in the region previous, this move led to the installation of Asia as an official Roman province under the control of Marcus Aquilius. One of the kingdoms that existed as an official friend of the new Roman province was Mithridates' kingdom of Pontus. The nations existed on good relations until Mithridates began expanding his empire westward. Conflict first arose when Mithridates

and Nicomedes III King of Bithynia both claimed rightful ownership of the region Cappadocia, and appealed to Rome for a decision, where Rome decided in favor of Nicomedes. Later, Nicomedes IV (the previous ruler's son) began raiding Mithridates' borders with Roman backing, inciting Mithridates to attack and defeat a dual Roman-Bithynian army in a series of battles. Following this, Mithridates quickly moved through Asia, acquiring territory rapidly with almost no resistance. In 88 BC, in what is referred to as the Asiatic Vespers, Mithridates ordered a coordinated assassination of 80,000 Italian citizens in the region. This, coupled with Mithridates advances which at that point stretched all the way into mainland Greece, caused Rome to declare war on the Pontic monarch, with Sulla winning control of the Roman force and advancing into Greece to meet Mithridates' armies.

In this First Mithridatic War (88-84 BC), Sulla decimated the forces of Mithridates in consecutive major battles at Chaeronea (86 BC) and Orchomenus (85 BC). After suffering these heavy losses the two commanders negotiated terms for peace. The terms were favorable to Mithridates, as Sulla was in a hurry to end the conflict and return to Rome to deal with matters there. Thus Mithridates was able to return to Pontus with the entirety of his initial kingdom intact. The Second Mithridatic War (83-81 BC) was hardly that, as it was initiated by Lucius Licinius Murena without consent from the Senate. Murena was left in command of legions in Asia after Sulla's departure, and after attacking Mithridates he was defeated by the Pontic King's forces in a small-scale engagement. This then led to Sulla re-affirming the peace between Mithridates and Rome, which ended the struggle.

The peace was broken when in 74 BC Nicomedes IV willed his kingdom to Rome following his death, which prompted Mithridates to invade the region. Roman response was to send Lucius Licinius Lucullus to command against the Pontic monarch, which began the Third and final Mithridatic War (73-63 BC). When the two forces met, Lucullus's legions handily defeated the forces of Mithridates and sent the Pontic king fleeing into Armenia seeking protection from their king and his ally, Tigranes the Great. Lucullus followed, winning victories into Armenia. However, after his campaign stalled and his soldiers mutinied against him, command of the legions was transferred to Pompey the Great in 66 BC, who was fresh off of handling the pirates of Cilicia. Pompey defeated Mithridates decisively in the only true battle between the commanders, and Mithridates proceeded to once again flee into the east. This time however, his son Pharnaces who was weary of the war with Rome, lead a mutiny against his father. In response, Mithridates killed himself, thus ending the reign of one of Rome's most enduring enemies.

What Did Mithridates Mean to Rome?

So the question still remains, how much of a true threat to the Roman Republic was Mithridates? Two schools of thought seem to present themselves. On the one hand his conflicts with the legions of Rome seem generally one-sided. With the exception of early successes before major Roman intervention occurred in the first Mithridatic War and a minor victory which effectively ended the second war, Mithridates was defeated decisively in head on encounters with Roman legions, often despite an overwhelming

advantage in numbers. Then why would he be portrayed by men such as Cicero as such a powerful and terrible threat? The answer perhaps could be political opportunity. After the mass Italian assassination enacted by Mithridates, his name would carry significant weight in the minds of Romans. Thus displaying him to the Roman people as a terrifying scourge could provide a springboard to fame and triumph upon defeating him. Indeed Marius and Sulla fought passionately over control of the legions designated to fight Mithridates, and Cicero assisted Pompey in vying for command in the region to defeat the Pontic King. So one possibility is that the actual military threat that Mithridates posed to Rome was similar to that of Antiochus III, namely a very minimal one. However, his depiction is exaggerated due to the necessity of creating a powerful enemy for an ambitious Roman such as Sulla or Pompey to defeat and achieve fame.

Alternately though, it is also conceivable that the threat of Mithridates to Rome was a very real one, and one that spanned beyond the mere military presence he maintained. At the time of Mithridates' reign, the Roman foothold in Asia Minor was tenuous, anti-Roman sentiment was very present in the region due to the greed of regional tax collectors. Thus a charismatic leader such as Mithridates, drawing upon the ancestries of both Greece and Persia, who fashioned himself publicly as a liberator of the Hellenistic East could present a serious concern for the Roman Republic if he succeeded in unifying the East against Rome. This threat gains weight when his diplomatic actions are considered. Mithridates formed an important marriage-alliance with Tigranes II of Armenia, and although that relationship is described as strained, it still substantiated the worries of loss of Roman control in the region. Mithridates is also said to have cooperated with the pirates of Cilicia, another thorn in the Republic's side, as well as

having diplomatic discussions with another major Roman enemy, Sertorius. Thus Mithridates as an imminent threat to the stability of the Roman's Republic would be justified when viewed through this lens of diplomatic unification against Rome not only in the region of the Hellenistic East, but also including alliances with other Roman enemies. This paper will then analyze the merits of these two potential theories regarding Mithridates' importance as a threat to the Roman Republic, and see which, if either, holds the most weight.

Chapter II

Mithridates as a Military Threat

The first step in analyzing what Mithridates truly meant to the Roman Republic is determining what sort of military threat he posed. A survey of major conflicts in the Mithridatic Wars and how they pertain to his military potency is thus a good place to begin. After this a brief examination of the military styles of both Roman armies of the time compared to what a Hellenistic Pontic force will be helpful in illuminating potential reasons for military shortcomings on the part of Mithridates, as well as perhaps establishing the idea that Roman military commanders could have foreseen their victories against the Pontic king. This knowledge thus could have led them to exaggerate his military prowess in order to achieve political fame and success within the Roman Republic at a time where power dynamics were very much in flux. Four major figures that can be analyzed in this respect are Sulla, Lucullus, Cicero, and Pompey, who dealt with Mithridates in the first and third Mithridatic Wars. The second war is largely ignored in ancient narratives, as it was an unauthorized struggle that was ended after a single minor battle. Thus after the conflicts have been examined, the level of design used by Sulla, Lucullus, and Pompey in these conflicts for political gain will be evaluated.

With respect to his potential military threat, Mithridates most likely appeared most daunting to the Roman Republic at the onset of the first war. His victory over a combined Roman/Bithynian force in 89 BC lead by Roman governor in the region Manius Aquillius was a dominant one. After the defeat, Appian describes Aquillius as

being executed by Mithridates by having molten gold poured down his throat.⁷ Acts such as these, coupled with the Italian massacre that occurred in 88 BC at Mithridates' behest, would have sent shockwaves through the Republic. However after Sulla took command of the forces against Mithridates, the series of catastrophic defeats suffered by the Pontic forces do much more to reveal the true balance of military power in the struggle.

Much of Mithridates' military fame comes from his rapid conquests of Asia Minor and most of Greece, however the resistance faced during these acquisitions was almost non-existent. Frederico Santangelo in his book *Impact of Empire: Sulla, The Elites, and the Empire: A Study of Roman Policies in Italy and the Greek East* says, "The level of the military threat that Mithridates posed to Rome must not be overrated. The victories that the so-called 'king of Pontus' obtained at the beginning of the conflict were mainly owed to the inadequate presence of Roman legions in the Greek East and to the parallel commitment in the Social War, rather than to the qualities of his forces"⁸.B.C. McGing writes of these early conquests in *Foreign Policy of Mithridates Eupator*, stating "Many places not only received him, but welcomed him."⁹, thus displaying how the welcoming nature of the region added to the ease with which Mithridates progressed through the region.

The reason McGing gives for this lack of pushback from conquered cities is Mithridates deft handling of propaganda by cultivating his image as a new mixed Greek-Eastern Alexander. He crafted an image of himself as not only a Hellenic king, whose

⁷ Appian *Roman History vol.II* "The Mithridatic Wars" ch. III

⁸ Frederico Santangelo *Sulla, The Elites, and the Empire: A Study of Roman Policies in Italy and Greek East* (Boston: Brill, 2007), 33

⁹ McGing *Foreign Policy* 112

court contained Greek courtiers of high learning, but also appealed to his Eastern roots as well, sacrificing to Persian Gods and dressing in lavish Eastern attire. Along with the promotion of his image, he also was extremely benevolent in his treatment of conquered peoples in his early campaigns, which allowed for ensuing cities to receive Mithridates warmly as a liberator, rather than a foreign conqueror. So although much is made of his expedient conquests of Asia and Greece, the majority of this campaign was enacted with no actual military resistance. Thus while this string of victories was influential in building the image of Mithridates in the eyes of both the Greek East and Rome, who had just lost the entirety of their holdings in Asia, the victories did little in the ways of providing proof of Mithridates military power.

This notion is supported by the military failures that followed. The first true failure of his campaign occurred with his botched siege of Rhodes as his armies progressed into Greece, where his equipment and soldiers proved inadequate to scale the city walls. However this appears to be more of a nod to the outstanding defenses of Rhodes, a notoriously tricky city to take conquer. So although it was a setback for Mithridates and left him discouraged, its nature does not indicate a lack of military might on the Pontic end. This realization of Pontic military inferiority would occur during the battle of Chaeronea in 87 BC, the first truly major Pontic-Roman battle. The battle is described by both Plutarch and Appian, and both give similar accounts. The Roman army commanded by Sulla is estimated to have been about 40,000 strong, with the Pontic force led by Mithridates' top general Archelaus estimated at 120,000. The Pontic force is also described as a strong, balanced force, containing both the renowned "bronze-shield" pikemen as well as a number of chariots, which had wreaked havoc upon the Bithynian-

Roman force previously. Despite the overwhelming advantage in size, Sulla's legions decimated the Pontic force. Pontic losses are estimated at between 100,000-110,000, while Appian places Roman losses at 15 and Plutarch at 12. While these staggering numbers are most likely exaggerated, they provide a pretty clear account of how deficient Mithridates' forces were in relation to those of Roman generals. This impression is further reinforced by the following encounter, the Battle of Orchomenus, within which Mithridates' force, again led by Archelaus, lost approximately 15,000 of their 80,000 troops, whereas the Romans lost nearly 100 of their 15,000.¹⁰

With victories of such a total nature, and Mithridates' forces in Greece decimated, it would appear that the way was paved for Sulla to push into Asia and completely eliminate the threat of Mithridates with relative ease. Surprisingly though, at this point Sulla decided to make peace with the Pontic king instead. The reasons for this provide key insight into how dangerous Sulla viewed Mithridates as being at that period in time. From 87-84 BC, Cinna was one of the consuls of the Roman republic. During a time of great unrest and political upheaval in Rome, Cinna was a rival of Sulla's and was persecuting members of Sulla's faction in Rome. In 86 BC, Cinna (along with his co-consul Marius, who was also in opposition to Sulla) ordered a mass proscription of members of Sulla's political faction. Following this, Cinna orchestrated control over Roman command against Mithridates to be given to Cinna's co-consul of 85 BC Flacchus, who then left to take over command of Sulla's troops. In addition to this, Plutarch describes many friends of Sulla's fled to his camp in Greece, including his wife and children who brought many of his valuables with her. Plutarch describes his wife

¹⁰ Plutarch *Lives Sulla* 393

begging him to return to Rome due to the proscription of his faction and the destruction of his possessions back home. Thus Sulla engaged in peace negotiations first with Archelaus, and then in person with Mithridates himself at Dardanus.

In Plutarch's account of this meeting, he describes Sulla in a complete position of power. He states that Sulla not only forced Mithridates to speak first, but then cut him off mid-speech and proceeded to verbally berate the Pontic King, denouncing his denouncing his annexation of Asia Minor as unjust, but also highlighting his complete military dominance over the king's forces to that point. Mithridates then acquiesced and agreed to the terms laid out by Sulla, which effectively allowed Mithridates to return with his initial territorial holdings, but forfeit all that he had gained.

These terms were seen as being extremely favorable towards Mithridates, considering he was responsible for the slaughter of thousands of unarmed Roman citizens, and Sulla's troops are described as being incensed at the decision, but it is clear that Sulla valued dealing with matters at home far more than the threat Mithridates posed to him. McGing describes them, "The terms that Sulla offered Mithridates were very far from that formal and unconditional surrender of a beaten enemy – known as *deditio* – that was by this time the normal conclusion of a Roman war."¹¹ However, he doesn't give credence to the notion that this leniency was simply because he was in a hurry to return home however, as Sulla did not make the return trip to Italy for another 18 months. The reason McGing gives is that Sulla was attempting to negotiate terms for return to Rome with consular deputations from afar, and that he decided to directly return only after

¹¹ McGing *Foreign Policy* 145

Cinna's death at the hands of his own troops. This idea is supported by Santangelo, who describes Sulla as biding his time in Greece, bolstering relations with cities there, particularly Athens, all the time with his eyes set on Italy. He says, "Sulla's main aim at the time was to portray himself as the legitimate representative of Rome and the only true defender of the *res publica*, who came to Italy to bring order after reconquering the East."¹² Sulla's leniency in the hasty peace-negotiations along with the lack of military success in direct combat with Sulla's forces thus provides a very weak portrayal of Mithridates military might at the conclusion of the First Mithridatic War. So while the initial victory against Marcus Aquilius's forces and the massacre of 88 BC would have indeed incited a fear of losing the Romans' holdings in the East, by the end of the struggle the senate's views of Mithridates would have radically shifted.

There is also reason to believe that Sulla would have been aware of Mithridates' military shortcomings. One manner in which he could have had foresight in relation to his armed conflicts with the Pontic King is knowledge of preceding wars with Macedonian styled armies. Roman victories in the Macedonian and Achaean Wars would have provided this awareness, however the struggle that truly could have informed him would have been the Syrian War which took place between 192-188 BC. The reason this struggle would have been more illuminating is the nature of both the belligerent commander, Antiochus III, as well as the nature of his army and how they fared against a Roman army. Antiochus III was an ambitious Hellenistic king very much in the mold of Mithridates, who had a number of successful military excursions before entering direct conflict with Rome. Also similarly to Mithridates, Antiochus was wildly unsuccessful on

¹² Santangelo *Sulla, Elites, and Empire* 220

the battlefield against the armies of Rome. The most damning example of this is the battle of Magnesia in 190 BC, for which Appian provides a detailed account. In this encounter the great Seleucid king reportedly outnumbered the Romans 70,000 to 30,000 and fought with a force very similar to that of the Pontic armies of Mithridates. The backbone of Antiochus' force was a phalanx in the Macedonian style of Alexander which was supported by heavy Eastern styled cavalry and specialized eastern forces such as scythed chariots and war elephants.¹³

Antiochus' armies were decidedly defeated in the Battle of Magnesia, and two major reasons can be provided for this. The first of these reasons is the ineffectiveness of the scythed chariots. Despite being a major factor in the armies of Antiochus and Mithridates', once adapted to they were easily dealt with by the Roman commander of the battle Lucius Cornelius Scipio. Thus Sulla would not have been intimidated by these chariots despite the terror they incited within the forces of Manius Aquillius, and we can infer that he would have had knowledge would have knowledge pertaining to handling them. More importantly though was the deficiency of the Macedonian phalanx in handling the more flexible units of Rome. The lack of flexibility is detailed by Appian in his account of the battle where he says, "The Romans did not come to close quarters nor approach them...but circled around them and assailed them with javelins and arrows, none of which missed their mark in the dense mass, who could neither turn the missiles aside nor open ranks and avoid them." Not only was the phalanx inferior to Roman fighting style previously in the second century BC, but the Roman forces became even more flexible and effective after the military reforms of Sulla's rival Marius in 107 BC.

¹³ Appian *Roman History vol. II* "The Syrian War" ch. XXXIII

This deficiency in the phalanx system is detailed by Adrienne Mayor's account of the Battle of Orchomenus in *The Poison King*, where she states "Dorylaeus's units trained in old-fashioned Greek hoplite combat proved cumbersome and slow in the face of the efficient, fast, and flexible new Roman formations..".¹⁴ Therefore, despite initial military victories by Mithridates in Asia and Greece, Sulla's ambitions for war against the Pontic king would have most likely been weighted more heavily towards military ambition rather than a necessary defense of Rome due to his knowledge of the Hellenic fighting style employed by Mithridates, and the efficacy of Roman armies in facing similar forces in the past.

So what evidence is there that supports the idea of Sulla seeking out conflict with Mithridates for political gain? Appian does not seem to indicate one way or the other, only detailing the chronology of the situation. Plutarch however, does indicate as much. He states that Sulla's "thoughts soared to the Mithridatic War"¹⁵ when pondering his political future. Santangelo seems to indicate that going to war with Mithridates was a step in a grander plan of Sulla, stating of the Mithridatic Wars in which the "winner would obtain an extraordinary legitimization to achieve prominence in Roman politics, if not complete supremacy. More importantly, the victorious general would be in a position to satisfy the greed of his army by exploiting the booty obtained from the reconquest of the Greek East. The soldiers' loyalty would be ensured for some years to come. When he decided to march on Rome, in 88 BC, Sulla was certainly aware of that."¹⁶ It thus appears that Sulla sought out conflict with Mithridates, and did indeed view war with the Pontic

¹⁴ Adrienne Mayor *The Poison King* (New Jersey: Princeton, 2010), 212

¹⁵ Plutarch *Sulla* 345

¹⁶ Santangelo *Sulla, Elites, and Empire* 33

King as a political opportunity. Indeed while preparing for departure to Asia with his soldiers in Southern Italy, he learned that his command against Mithridates was shifted to Marius. In response, Sulla marched on Rome with his legions, where he forced Marius and his followers to flee and consolidated his power within the city. Only after this was completed did he depart to face Mithridates. Thus it appears that Sulla was extremely concerned with the potential political opportunities that a conflict with Mithridates could award him, which diminishes the notion that Mithridates was a major military threat to the Roman Republic.

The Third Mithridatic War seems to provide an even less ambiguous description of Mithridates and the threat he posed to Rome. At the onset of the war, which began in 73 BC, Mithridates was 63 and despite still clearly having anti-Roman designs, was an aging shell of the powerful monarch he once was. His continued belligerence against Rome in Asia is displayed by his encroachments into Bithynia, which began after the region was bequeathed to Rome in Nicomedes' IV will. War with the Pontic king was thus an even more enticing prospect than before. After the third struggle was sparked, Lucius Lucullus was granted command against Mithridates. Both primary and modern sources seem to indicate that despite Mithridates technically initiating the war by invading Bithynia, ambitious parties in Rome were actively attempting to instigate the king into just such actions by accepting the land which had previously been owned and acquired by Mithridates' father. Plutarch claims that, "many in Rome were now trying to stir up anew the Mithridatic War" and that when the governorship of Cilicia became

available “there were many eager applicants for the province.”¹⁷ A.N. Sherwin White writes in *Roman Foreign Policy in the East* that Lucullus was one of these eager applicants “in expectation of trouble with Mithridates”¹⁸ which is supported by Plutarch stating that Lucullus thought the struggle would be “one that ‘would bring great fame and involve little difficulty’.”¹⁹ Therefore the excited nature of Lucullus and his contemporaries to enter combat with Mithridates displays that war with the king was very much seen as a means for political triumph, rather than the defense of Rome.

The nature of Lucullus’ encounters with Mithridates further supported this idea, as in his first campaign against Mithridates he won every encounter, killing 300,000 of his men (according to Plutarch) and sending Mithridates fleeing to the kingdom of his ally Tigranes the Great, King of Armenia. Lucullus then proceeded into Armenia, which eventually proved troublesome for him. Despite initial victories, he was pushed back at the battle of Artaxata in 68 BC, and eventually his troops refused to travel any further into the mountainous region. Velleius Paterculus credits this prolonging of the war and pursuit of Mithridates as being due to Lucullus’ love of money, and states “That he had not put an end to the war was due, one might say, to lack of inclination rather than ability.”²⁰ Indeed Lucullus was extending the war by taking extended stays in Pontic and Armenian cities, looting them, and throwing grand festivals. Back in Rome during this period, other Romans of political standing sought to use the prolonged nature of the war to their advantage. Two of these men were Pompey the Great and Marcus Tullius Cicero.

¹⁷ Plutarch *Lives Lucullus* 485

¹⁸ A.N. Sherwin White *Roman Foreign Policy in the East* (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma, 1983), 163

¹⁹ Plutarch *Lives Pompey* ch. XX

²⁰ Velleius Paterculus *the Roman History* vol. II ch. xxxiii

Pompey's supporters in Rome lead a movement that pushed for command over the armies opposing Mithridates and Tigranes to be transferred to Pompey, which would allow for more military control to be transferred to Pompey than any before him.

One of these supporters was a young, ambitious Cicero. In his speech the *Pro Lege Manilia* Cicero openly calls for the transfer of command to Pompey. A key factor in this speech is his portrayal of Mithridates, which greatly exaggerates the threat of the Pontic king and is meant to inspire fear into those listening. He describes Mithridates as a restless adversary, "led by his impunity" and devoting all his power "not to effacing the memory of the late war but to preparing for a new one".²¹ He also uses the orchestrated assassination of 88 BC as a rhetorical tool to inspire fear, detailing how Mithridates "marked out our citizens for butcher and slaughter, and has hitherto not only failed to pay any penalty but has remained on his throne for twenty two years from that date." Sherwin-White refers to this characterization of Mithridates as "a masterpiece of misrepresentation" and details the speech as a bombastic political ploy that hardly focuses on the content of the bill it claims to discuss. Manfred Fuhrman supports this idea in his book *Cicero and the Roman Republic*, stating of the speech, "essentially a eulogy of Pompey, reveals that Cicero, a beginner in the area of high politics, was thoroughly imbued with a sense of his important assignment."²² Thus Cicero uses the non-existent threat of Mithridates for political gain, in an attempt to gain support from Pompey and his allies in Rome.

²¹ Cicero *Pro Lege Manilia* pg.21

²² Manfred Fuhrman *Cicero and the Roman Republic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 53

The movement was successful, because in 66 BC Pompey was awarded command against Mithridates. Lucullus' bitterness over being robbed of his triumph is clear, as Velleius Paterclus describes an exchange of insults between Lucullus and Pompey, "Pompey charging Lucullus with his unsavory greed of money, and Lucullus taunting Pompey with his unbounded ambition for military power. Neither could be convicted of falsehood in his charge against the other."²³ This quote also reveals that Pompey appeared to be less than disappointed over the awarded command. Pompey did indeed make a half-hearted statement that he was burdened with such an order, and wished to be at home with his family rather than commanding armies, but this was standard fare and hardly taken seriously. Plutarch states of this that his friends, "could not abide his dissimulation; they knew that his enmity towards Lucullus gave fuel to his innate ambition and love of power, and made him all the more delighted. And certainly his actions soon unmasked him."²⁴

It is logical that Pompey would be excited at the opportunity. After previous victories over Sertorius, Spartacus, and the pirates of Cilicia, Pompey now had the opportunity to finish off one of Rome's oldest and most notorious villains, even though the work left to be done against him was, as described by Lucullus, not a war but merely a shadow of one. Indeed, the ensuing actions of Mithridates reinforced this. After hearing of the change in command to Pompey, Mithridates immediately attempted to attain peace, however he balked at the terms of unconditional surrender that were given in response by Pompey. Only one decisive battle took place between the two commanders, a conflict by

²³ Velleius Paterculus *the Roman History* vol. II ch.xxxiii

²⁴ Plutarch *Lives Pompey* ch.XXX-XXXI

moonlight within which the majority of Mithridates' forces were annihilated, mirroring most of the other battles that took place during the Mithridatic Wars. It was soon after this that the old king Mithridates committed suicide after a mutiny was lead against him by his son Pharnaces.

The desire for achieving victory over Mithridates can be understood better when examining the nature of the ensuing triumph that occurred in 61 BC when Pompey returned to Rome. A lavish celebration and acknowledgement of victory, a Roman triumph was an extremely powerful, memorable, and desirable event. Taking place on his birthday, Pompey's triumphal procession in 61 BC in particular was spectacular, described by Mary Beard in her book *The Roman Triumph* as "one of the most extraordinary birthday celebrations in the history of the world."²⁵ This was due to the vast amount of intriguing and exotic treasures and captives that Pompey brought with him from his victories against Mithridates, Tigranes, and the pirates of Cilicia.

Roman triumphs were a significant event that are covered in great detail by ancient writers, which Beard attributes to their massive impact. She writes that their prominence in Roman literature is, "due in large part to the triumph's centrality in Roman political and cultural life and to the undoubted impact of its celebration. Writers lingered on their triumphal descriptions because the ceremony seemed important to them."²⁶ Such a celebration would have cemented a commander's legacy as supreme in the public eye as well as significantly boosting one's political prestige. It is thus understandable why Sulla, Lucullus, and finally Pompey would've desired such a celebration in a period of

²⁵ Mary Beard *The Roman Triumph* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 2007), 10

²⁶ Beard *Roman Triumph* 60

political upheaval, and thus why a campaign against Mithridates was such an important political opportunity.

Therefore once again the image of Mithridates as the powerful, scourge of Rome that he is often depicted as was not supported by the actual military conflicts that ensued. Throughout the Mithridatic Wars, despite being heralded as an Alexander the Great like figure who commanded vast hordes of men to liberate Asia and Greece, the Pontic King was routinely defeated by his Roman counterparts by very-lop sided margins. Thus a logical conclusion for why he was continually portrayed as such an imminent threat to Rome would be the use of struggles against him as a means for realizing political ambitions. Sulla, Lucullus, Cicero, and Pompey all sought out encounters with Mithridates in order to forward themselves in the Roman stratosphere, which provides evidence against the portrayal of Mithridates as one of Rome's most powerful enemies, at least in the strictly military sense.

Chapter III

Mithridates as a Threat of Eastern Destabilization

With the notion of Mithridates posing a serious military threat to the Roman Republic being dismissed, the question of how Mithridates may have otherwise acted as a threat must now be analyzed. Rome's foothold in Asia had been established relatively recently, and thus significant diplomatic relations between Rome and neighboring regions such as Armenia and Parthia had not been fostered. Therefore Mithridates' political maneuvering could have theoretically threatened Rome's diplomatic standing with potentially the entirety of the Eastern world. This possibility is reinforced by the acceptance of Mithridates by the Greek East due to his creation of the self-image of him being an Alexandrian liberator of the Greek world, as well as his marriage-alliance with Tigranes of Armenia, which could've shifted the relations of other Eastern nations in his favor. Mithridates also negotiated alliances with Roman enemies such as the pirates of Cilicia and the Roman ex-patriot Sertorius, which will be discussed in greater detail later.²⁷ Thus it is conceivable that the clever foreign policy of Mithridates could have threatened Rome in the sense that the Pontic King could've destabilized Roman relations in the East, thus engaging them in a war with nations from whom Rome only desired neutral relations. However for this view to be given credence, Rome's designs and level of inclusion in the region must first be analyzed. Then the nature of Mithridates' relations with his allies must be examined to determine if their nature truly designated them as a potentially destabilizing threat to Rome's holdings.

²⁷ Appian *Roman History* Vol.II Book XII Ch. X

The aggressive foreign policy of Mithridates posed a threat to Rome in two senses: the cultivating of his image as Greek liberator which allowed for quick movement through Asia Minor and mainland Greece, and his creation of alliances with Armenia, the pirates of Cilicia, and Sertorius. In reference of the first of these threats, Mithridates' aforementioned philhellenic posturing and use of propaganda could have heightened Roman fear of the Pontic king. These actions were no accident, as McGing states "...certainly in the 90's he clearly realized that successful appeal to the Greeks would win for him a highly valuable, indeed probably necessary, source of support for any prospective opposition to Rome."²⁸ The effect of this posturing and care of self-image would have been legitimized by the warm receptions he received as a liberator throughout Asia Minor, and the support of major cities such as Athens to the Mithridatic cause. Santangelo writes of this, "Not only was he in control of the whole Roman province of Asia, where many Greek cities had greeted him as a liberator and thousands of Roman citizens had been killed in the so-called 'Asiatic Vespers'. By then the phase in which the empire had been under serious threat from various sides was over, the Eastern part of the empire was simply no longer in Roman hands."²⁹ The Asiatic Vespers mentioned here would have also heightened the sense of terror associated with Mithridates, and reinforced the idea that the Greek East had tied their favor to the king.

The diplomatic actions of mainland Greece too were an example of unified Greek resistance to Rome, as its cultural center Athens was among the most enthusiastic supporters of the King. Of this Klaus Bringman writes in *History of the Roman Republic*,

²⁸ B.C. McGing *The Foreign Policy of Mithridates VI Eupator King of Pontus* 89

²⁹ Frederico Santangelo *Sulla, Elites, and Empire* 34

“Subsequently an anti-Roman mood also gained the upper hand in Macedonia and large parts of Greece. Even Athens, which had been one of the main beneficiaries of Roman policies after the Third Macedonian War, allowed itself both willingly and foolishly to be drawn onto the side of the king.”³⁰ His image as a liberator of Greece from the greedy, imperialistic Romans would’ve thus emphasized the true nature of Mithridates’ threat to Rome; perhaps militarily he would not have seemed imposing, but the potentiality of a unified Greece under his banner, accompanied by the crises faced by Rome with the Social War, would’ve been cause for alarm.

The foreign policy employed by Mithridates in negotiating with existing Roman enemies, as well as potential enemies with Tigranes of Armenia, also could’ve threatened the stability of Rome’s grasp over its territories in a critical time. On the face of it, Mithridates’ engineering of these alliances with enemies of Rome, would’ve possibly mitigated the shortcomings of his military by adding other threats against Rome to his side of the struggle at a time when Roman resources and manpower in Asia were not abundant. The most primary of these alliances is his connection to King Tigranes of Armenia. A powerful Eastern king, Tigranes and Armenia allied with Mithridates when Tigranes married Mithridates’ daughter Cleopatra in 54 BC. This alliance could appear problematic because of the prestige associated with Tigranes at that time, as well as Rome’s previous history with Armenia, which included Armenian support of Antiochus the Great in the Syrian Wars as well as allowing Hannibal refuge within their kingdom³¹. Thus it is understandable that war with a nation with whom it had previously hostile

³⁰ Klaus Bringmann *History of the Roman Republic* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), 190

³¹ Adrienne Mayor *The Poison King* 137

encounters with, and currently knew relatively little about, seemed undesirable. However, similar to the minimal military threat Mithridates' posed to Rome, his alliance with Tigranes seemed far more imposing than it truly was. This façade of an imposing Pontic-Armenian coalition was just that for two main reasons: that the potential military and diplomatic support provided by Tigranes was actually minimal, and more importantly the nature of his relationship with Mithridates was actually very strained and Tigranes' actions throughout the Mithridatic Wars often bordered on neutrality.

Described as he “foremost monarch of the lands beyond the Euphrates”³², Tigranes would have certainly appeared an opposing figure to Rome based on their knowledge of him and what was stated of him. He was very particular about his image as well, referring to himself as King of Kings and always appearing in lavish attire. Mayor describes him as, “strong-willed, rich, energetic, ambitious, and popular”.³³ Tigranes made a name for himself by expanding his holdings to include Syria, Mesopotamia, and parts of Parthia in the period between the first and third Mithridatic Wars, but similar to Mithridates, much of this was due to the nature of the armies that opposed him, and not the merits of his own. This idea is displayed by the performance of the inferior Armenian troops in the Third Mithridatic War, when facing the armies of Lucullus. As mentioned in the previous chapter, when finally confronting a Roman force, Tigranes was defeated decisively in consecutive battles at Tigranocerta and Arxatata despite an overwhelming advantage of numbers, displaying just how minimal the Armenian military threat was to the Republic despite an initial appearance to the contrary.

³² Sherwin-White *Roman Foreign Policy* 173

³³ Adrienne Mayor *The Poison King* 137

The reluctant nature of the Armenian-Pontic alliance also diminishes the possible threat it would've posed to Rome. Based on his aggressive actions we can infer that like Mithridates, Tigranes was an extremely ambitious monarch who valued his own designs far above those of his Pontic ally. Mayor describes Tigranes as having no desire to engage in a conflict with Rome, only initially supporting Mithridates during his initial invasion of Cappadocia preceding the first Mithridatic War, and instead using the alliance as a means for expanding his personal domain, which he did with great success. The circumspect nature of their bond is further highlighted by how Tigranes received Mithridates during his flight from Lucullus during the third Mithridatic war. Sherwin-White writes of this encounter, "Tigranes, though bound by the usages of kingship, found him (Mithridates) an embarrassing guest, and would do no more than grant him suitable maintenance in a remote fortress, refusing to visit or receive his unwelcome guest." The only direct conflict and display of anti-Roman aggression exhibited by Tigranes was when publicly insulted by Appius Claudius, the emissary sent by Lucullus to negotiate the surrender of Mithridates to the Romans. Despite receiving Appius with "all the ceremonial of an Iranian court", the young emissary bluntly stated that "he had come either to take Mithridates off as his prisoner for the triumph of Lucullus, or to declare war on the King of Kings."³⁴

Thus it is understandable that Tigranes responded by declaring war, not out of loyalty to Mithridates but rather to defend the pride of his kingdom. Later in the struggle once Pompey had taken command against Mithridates, Tigranes made a point to immediately surrender to the Roman general in grand fashion. He thus was treated

³⁴ Sherwin-White *Roman Foreign Policy* 173-174

favorably by Pompey, and died ruling Armenia as a Roman ally. Thus the threat of a powerful Pontic-Armenian coalition seems an exaggerated one, as not only did Tigranes not represent a true military threat to Rome despite his vast holdings, but the nature of the alliance was not nearly as firm as it may have appeared, and Tigranes was firmly against conflict with Rome until being essentially forced to engage with them.

With the most important of Mithridates' alliances now examined, his other diplomatic excursions with Roman enemies must be analyzed. Indeed, Magie states in *Roman Rule in Asia*, "It seems evident that at least some of the dangers in which the Romans were placed were due to the efforts of Mithridates to strengthen his position by abetting their enemies."³⁵ The first of these relationships is between the Pontic monarch and the pirates of Cilicia, who had been a thorn in the side of the Roman Republic for some time. Regarding the danger of the pirates and Mithridates' relation to them is described by Mayor, "The corsairs not only looted ship's cargoes and held rich passengers for ransom; they made bold raids inland to capture droves of slaves, and they even besieged walled cities. Pirates offered mercenary services to warring parties during the late Hellenistic period. As a matter of war strategy and for profit, Mithridates continued and built upon his father's lucrative relations with the pirate admirals."³⁶

At this time Roman naval power was very weak comparatively to its past, thus making the alliance with the Cilicians even more advantageous for Mithridates³⁷. The only true military advantage Mithridates held over the Romans through the course of the Mithridatic struggles was in the sea, which often was the reason for his frequent escapes

³⁵ David Magie *Roman Rule in Asia Minor* 322

³⁶ Adrienne Mayor *The Poison King* 116

³⁷ Sherwin-White *Roman Foreign Policy* 129

from Roman hands, one example being his escape after the struggle at Cyzicus in the third war. Thus the addition of an already hostile enemy to the fold of Mithridates' anti-Roman movement at a time where naval power was a weakness for Rome would prove genuinely helpful to the Pontic King, and indeed add some legitimacy to his war on Rome in terms of conflict at sea.

The next alliance formed by Mithridates was his with Sertorius, who at the time was waging war against the Roman government in Spain and was also in cooperation with the pirates. Heralded as a "new Hannibal" by the native Spaniards forces he was commanding, Sertorius represented a potentially powerful ally for Mithridates that would've placed him "under much less pressure and have much freer scope both for defense and offence in the east."³⁸ Thus Mithridates and Sertorius agreed upon terms of the alliance in 75 BC preceding the third Mithridatic War, with Mithridates sending naval and financial support and Sertorius sending an army to reinforce Mithridates in Asia.

The Roman troops supplied by Sertorius also trained Mithridates' soldiers in a more Roman fighting style and alignment, which would potentially heighten the military threat of Mithridates. However not only would the Romans not have been aware of this training so their perception of his military prowess would've remained constant and, as it turns out, justified because as previously stated the armies of Mithridates were just as ineffective in this third Mithridatic War than in those previous. Thus even in attempting to adapt his military strategies to meet Rome's, Mithridates' forces still failed catastrophically. Regardless, in terms of a potential anti-Roman coalition that could

³⁸ McGing *the Foreign Policy* 137

potentially destabilize Roman control in both Asia and Spain, it held the most weight of Mithridates' foreign policy decisions. As events turned out, the full might of this collaboration was never realized, as early in the third Mithridatic War in 72 BC Sertorius was assassinated, and the remnants of his resistant force was easily dispatched by Mithridates' future adversary Pompey. One can only speculate on what would have occurred if Sertorius would have lived, however in regards to the threat Mithridates would've posed, it is unlikely it would have seriously changed considering how effective Lucullus, and eventually Pompey, was in opposing his armies. In terms of political threat however, Mithridates' alliance with Sertorius was an intelligent one and was a move that most likely provided the realest threat to Rome in his tenure as king.

Having now determined that the military and diplomatic danger that Mithridates posed to the Roman Republic was not truly imposing, it will be useful to examine what Rome's intentions were in Asia, as well as the state of their holdings there previous to the Mithridatic Wars. This will be useful in analyzing the level of worry felt in regards to Mithridates potentially uniting foreign enemies against Rome, even if those worries would've ultimately been misplaced. The situation within which Mithridates' would've been seen as most threatening in terms of establishing a unified East against Rome would've been if Roman establishment in the province of Asia was significant. However, this doesn't appear to be the case. In the *Cambridge Companion to the Roman Republic* Erich S. Gruen states that "the senate had contented itself with the legacy of Attalus",³⁹ and Rome's actions display a hesitancy to expand further into Asia, while their

³⁹ Erich S. Gruen *Cambridge Companion to the Roman Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2004), 262

governance and military presence in the region was extremely sparse. In *Hegemony to Empire*, Robert Morstein Kallet-Marx calls Rome's imperium in the East among its weakest and "had been upheld hitherto with a bare minimum of manpower and rested ultimately on general resignation to Rome's overwhelming power".⁴⁰

There are records of significant economic value of the Roman province of Asia however, although historical accounts of this now appear to be overstated. In the *Pro Lege Manilia*, Cicero states that Asia surpassed all other provinces of Rome in the value of her exports. However in *The Roman Economy: Trade In Asia Minor and the Niche Market* Barbara Levick states that evidence for this is exaggerated and anecdotal and that Asia Minor was not the primary trading route from the East.⁴¹ She does acknowledge the existence of trade through the region, and even if the infrastructure for said trade was not as substantial as in other provinces, it still would've been a valuable source of income during strenuous times for the Republic and worth protecting. Thus Mithridates' actions as a politically destabilizing force do indeed appear to hold weight here, as his expedient conquering of Asia Minor would've undermined a valuable source of income for the Republic.

Although the economic value of Asia was at least moderately significant, the greatest threat Mithridates and his confederation presented to the Roman Republic was to its international prestige. Although Rome had not invested manpower in Asia, it had committed to holding the region as a Roman province and still held its reputation as the supreme power in the Mediterranean. Thus Mithridates taking advantage of Rome's

⁴⁰ Robert Morstein Kallet-Marx *From Hegemony to Empire* (Berkeley: University of California, 1996), 257

⁴¹ Barbara Levick *The Roman Economy: Trade In Asia Minor and the Niche Market* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge 2004), 181

feeble position in Asia could seriously harm Rome's reputation at a vital time for a Roman Republic engaged in a period of major political upheaval with numerous enemies abroad. The danger of these movements were amplified by the willingness of Greece to join his cause,⁴² which would have also threatened to unravel Roman control and stability in Greece-Macedonia, which were important Roman possessions. His success in luring other enemies such as Sertorius and the Cilician pirates to his side and the perception of power associated with the alliance with Tigranes would have also added to this Roman unease. The eagerness of others to join Mithridates could've signaled to other Roman enemies that now was the time to strike, which Rome could not afford during such a tumultuous era. So although the true military threat of Mithridates and his allies may not have truly been imposing, the anti-Roman precedent which he set in the Mithridatic wars was truly threatening not only to the economic well-being of the Republic, but also to its prestige, which is why the Mithridatic Wars warranted such a firm Roman response.

⁴² McGing *Foreign Policy* 109

Chapter IV

Conclusions

The goal of this paper has been to decipher exactly what Mithridates meant to the Roman Republic throughout the period encompassing the three wars between the two parties. Difficulties arise when attempting to answer this question due to how the primary sources describe the Pontic monarch in comparison to how facts pertaining to the wars appear. Ancient writers from Plutarch to Appian to Cicero all paint Mithridates as a noteworthy and imposing figure, both personally and militarily. The mythos surrounding his character certainly contributed to this, both as it was cultivated by himself and the Romans as well. Mithridates went to great lengths to appear as a heroic liberator to both the Greek and Persian constituents within the territories he presided over, as well as those abroad in lands he sought. His expert image cultivation and use of propaganda thus allowed him to be viewed as a larger than life presence, existing as at the very least a more intriguing threat than previous Roman enemies such as Pyrrhus or Jugurtha.

For these reasons Mithridates was able to win favor throughout the Greek East and experience a period of immediate success, both in stretching his territories into mainland Greece as well as inspiring terror back home in Rome with the mass Italian assassination of 88 BC. However once a Roman response was sent to meet the forces of Mithridates at the onset of the first Mithridatic War, his military might does not appear to align with the ferocity of his image. From a military perspective Mithridates was a spectacular failure when facing the Romans, losing battles consistently throughout the three wars, often with overwhelmingly favorable numbers. Until the third war his forces

employed the outdated Macedonian form of combat which was deftly handled by the superior forces of Rome, and even when attempts were made to adapt his forces in the third war he was handily defeated.

The argument can be made that the threat Mithridates posed to the Roman Republic extended beyond sheer military force. Perhaps Mithridates' most valuable skill was his expertise in foreign policy, which he used to his advantage throughout his reign. He established relations with the regional power Armenia along with Roman enemies such as the pirates of Cilicia and the Roman ex-patriot Sertorius. He also for a brief period united the Hellenistic east and mainland Greece under his banner, attracting the support of major cities such as Athens for his cause. Thus Mithridates could've represented more than simply armies on the battlefield; he could've represented a diverse and unified front against the Romans, at a time when the Republic itself was in a period of great social and political turmoil. This line of thinking appears on the face of it very attractive, but upon closer examination comes up short.

All of the foreign relations managed by Mithridates against the Roman Republic were less threatening to Rome than they appear in a historical survey of the period. The majority of Greek cities that supported Mithridates flipped allegiance back to Rome once Sulla arrived with Roman legions to face the Pontic forces in Greece, and those that remained loyal quickly changed their minds once Sulla made an example of Athens with his devastating treatment of the city. The alliance with Sertorius, although initially appearing promising for the two Roman rivals, quickly fell through as Sertorius was assassinated before anything could truly come of it. Most importantly, the alliance with

Armenia and their king Tigranes the Great was hardly a harmonious one. Tigranes saw the relationship as a means to build upon his own prestige, was weary of Mithridates' actions towards the republic and avoided direct conflict with Rome whenever possible. Thus this view that Mithridates spearheaded a potentially destabilizing, consolidated force against Rome is too vastly exaggerated.

The reason for Mithridates' portrayal as an imminent threat to the Roman Republic is consequently a political one. His image as a menace for Rome can be explained by the use of the Pontic King as a vehicle for political ascension in a Roman world of civic upheaval. The famous personages such as Sulla, Pompey, Cicero, and Lucullus all had much to gain by winning a triumph against Mithridates. Their attitudes towards Mithridates also display that they truly did not believe that a war with the monarch provided much of a downside, and they are described as being eager to engage in a war with an enemy with an extremely powerful name, but not much behind it. Sulla himself fought harshly with Marius for command of the legions against Mithridates. Many Romans jumped at the opportunity for command against the King as well in the Third Mithridatic War, and the eventual winner of this struggle was utterly bitter when having to hand over command to Pompey. Thus Mithridates the myth appears to be far more imposing than Mithridates the man. A fascinating historical character of immense ambition who, like those before and after him, simply could not match up with the might of Rome. Mithridates however thusly does provide key insight into how historical characters and events can be transformed and built up to meet political ends, and without close examination these transformations can become realized by only analyzing historical accounts on the superficial level that is often provided to us.

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