

# The Search for Mithridates. Reception of Mithridates VI between the 15th and the 20th Centuries

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*“dont les seuls défaites ont fait presque  
toute la gloire de trois plus grands  
capitaines de la république”*

Jean Racine, *Mithridate*

## *Introduction*

“Il n’y a guère de nom plus connu que celui de Mithridate”. This is a quotation from the preface of Jean Racine’s tragedy *Mithridate*, which was published in 1673. Today, more than three hundred years later nobody would agree with this. Familiarity with Mithridates seems to have decreased enormously since the 17th century. But what was the reason for the high level of recognition enjoyed by the last Pontic king at this time? What knowledge of Mithridates did people living in Europe in the middle of the 17th century have? How did they perceive and interpret the historical facts found in the ancient written sources? What opinions did Mithridates elicit in scholarly and popular thinking? Through which imagined constructs was knowledge of the last Pontic king generated?

This paper deals with the reception of Mithridates between the 15th and the 20th centuries. The last Pontic king was the subject of scientific works as well as a source of inspiration in popular literature and opera over these centuries. My aim is to show how certain historical facts involving Mithridates were used, distorted, overlooked and finally constructed into positive and negative images of him. In order to understand the changes that occurred over time it is necessary to focus our attention not on Mithridates, but on those who have interpreted him.<sup>1</sup>

*Mithridates as the epitome of multilingualism*

Throughout the centuries, curious legends about the extraordinary intellectual achievement of the last Pontic king have been told. Mithridates supposedly had a prodigious memory. Pliny the Elder and other Roman historians report that he could speak the languages of all the twentytwo nations he ruled.<sup>2</sup> Since the 16th century, the documentation and description of the multitude and diversity of languages have been connected with the name “Mithridates”. In 1555, the Swiss scholar Conrad Gesner published a linguistic encyclopaedia with the title *Mithridates sive de differentiis linguarum* (about the differentiation of languages). Gesner may also have used Mithridates’ name, because the Pontic king was an opponent of the Roman Empire. The protestant Gesner was as much opposed to universal Roman Catholic power as Mithridates was opposed to Rome’s hegemony.<sup>3</sup> Later, other linguists continued to associate increased knowledge of the languages of the world with the multilingualism of Mithridates. Johann Christoff Adelung, a German philologist and grammarian of the early nineteenth century, for instance, entitled his multivolume encyclopaedic work *Mithridates, oder allgemeine Sprachenkunde*.<sup>4</sup> The most recent comparative linguistic work by Jürgen Trabant, published in 2003, again bears the name of the last Pontic king.<sup>5</sup>

*Mithridates as the epitome of botany and antidotes*

Throughout Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, Mithridates was associated with botany and pharmacology through the reading of Pliny, Justinus and other ancient authors. Some plants still bear his name, such as *mithridatia* and *eupatoria*.<sup>6</sup> Mithridates supposedly sought to harden himself against poisoning by taking increasing sub-lethal doses of those poisons of which he knew until he was able to tolerate lethal doses.<sup>7</sup> Out of fear of being poisoned by one of his many enemies, Mithridates fashioned a universal antidote, *antidotum mithridaticum*, which consisted of dozens of ingredients. After Mithridates was defeated by Pompeius, a notebook was found in the king’s archives with a prescription for an antidote, which, modestly, consisted of two dried walnuts, two figs, and twenty leaves of rue pounded together with a pinch of salt (Plin. *HN* 25.7). Among other documents were detailed accounts of medical plants, together with specimens and notes on each, all of which Pompeius ordered to be translated into Latin. Pliny (*HN* 29.25) describes a Mithridatic antidote with fifty-four ingredients and remarks that he is sceptical of theriacs such as *mithridaticum* with their countless ingredients.<sup>8</sup> The practice of protecting oneself against poison by gradually self-administering non-lethal doses, aiming to develop immunity, is called mithridatizing.<sup>9</sup> The pharmacological wisdom of Mithridates remained in the knowledge of humanity for centuries. For instance, it turns up in the poem *Terence, This is Stupid Stuff* by the English poet and classical scholar Alfred Edward Houseman in his cycle

of poems *A Shropshire Lad*,<sup>10</sup> and in a poem by Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Mithridates Analysis*.<sup>11</sup>

*The death of Mithridates in popular literature*

Giovanni Boccaccio's *De casibus virorum illustrium*

It was in the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries that printed editions of the ancient writers became available in their original languages and in translation. As the ancient sources became familiar, interest in history and historical personalities grew. Writers like Dante and Boccaccio transferred ancient history into their own worlds of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Among many other important works Giovanni Boccaccio wrote the moralistic biographical book *De casibus virorum illustrium*

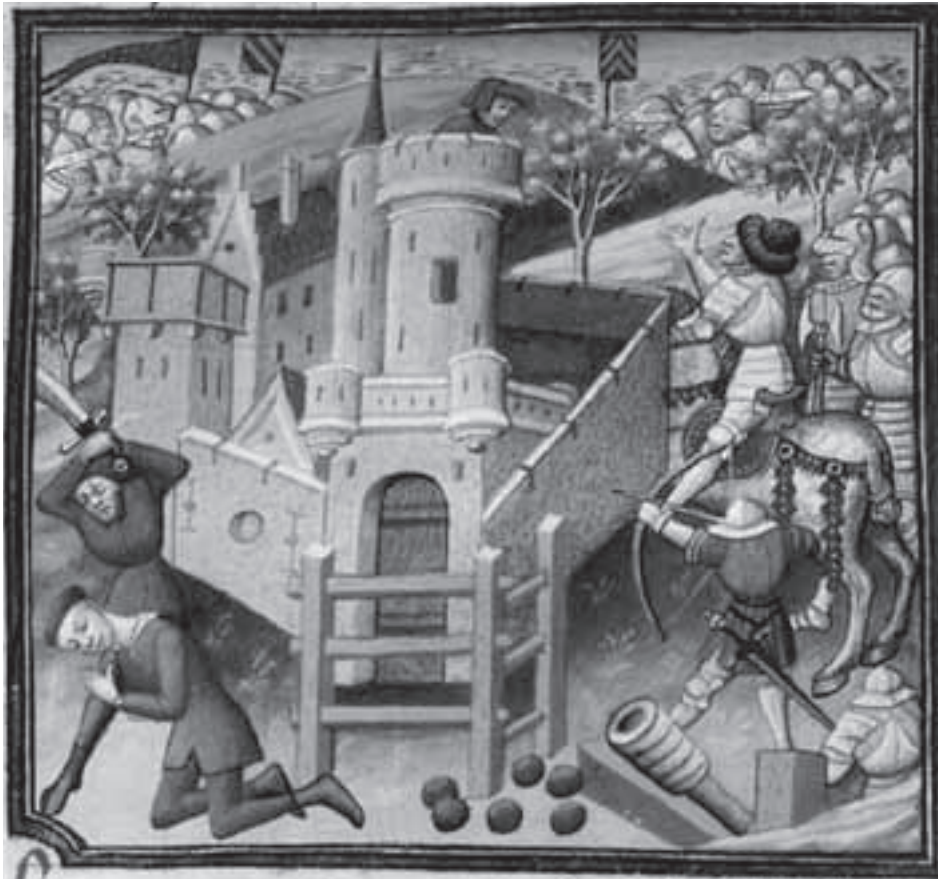


Fig. 1. "Mithridate VI assiégé et mort de Mithridate VI" by Boccaccio. Book illustration from *De casibus illustrium virorum* (1355-1360), French translation Laurent de Premierfait. France, 15th century AD (France, Lyon).



Fig. 2. "Mithridate VI assiégé et mort de Mithridate VI" by Boccaccio. Book illustration from *De casibus illustrium virorum* (1355-1360), French translation Laurent de Premierfait. France, 15th century AD (France, Lyon).

between 1357 and 1363, which tells of the fall of famous men in antiquity. This biography includes Mithridates side-by-side with Pompeius Magnus, Caesar, Marcus Antonius and Kleopatra. The French translation of Boccaccio's work by Laurent de Premierfait, first published in 1400 contains richly illustrated pages, four of them portraying the death of Mithridates.<sup>12</sup> The first shows the hopeless situation of Mithridates (Fig. 1). His castle is already surrounded by numerous Roman soldiers; the king portrayed as a beardless young man waits outside the castle for his execution, kneeling with clasped hands while his slave strikes him with his sword. In the



second illustration Mithridates is shown as an old man wearing a crown and a cuirass. Rather than depicting the slave murdering Mithridates, the artist portrayed an armoured Roman soldier. The soldier is thrusting his sword into the waist of the falling king where the blood flows down along his left leg. The motif of the falling king seems to be caricaturing Mithridates as slightly ridiculous. The third version of the death of Mithridates again portrays the king as an old man with a long white beard clad in the fashion of Medieval rulers (Fig. 2). He is labelled with his name to facilitate identification. Mithridates is shown kneeling at a distance from his castle while his killer approaches with a raised sword from behind. Claspings his hands on his breast the king is depicted very much in the pose of a Christian praying. The final picture portrays the scene after his killing with the headless body of Mithridates lying on a plank while his killer continues cutting off his limbs with a knife.

Comparing these illustrations with the ancient sources, the distortions and fantasies of the people living in Europe at the end of the 15th century concerning the historical person of Mithridates become clear. All details of architecture, weaponry, clothing and other accessories are in the Medieval tradition. It is furthermore noteworthy that the image of Mithridates does not differ either in appearance or in posture and gesture from the other famous men of antiquity illustrated in Boccaccio's book.

### *Tragedies of the 17th century*

In the 17th century, the name of the Pontic king frequently recurs in European literature and plays. After the Italian dramatist Arelino Corbellini<sup>13</sup> it was the French literature tradition, which had the widest impact.<sup>14</sup> Gautier de Costes de La Calprenède (1610-1663), a royal guardian and chamberlain of Louis XIII, was the first French author to write a tragedy about the Pontic king, which appeared under the title *La mort de Mithridate* in 1637.<sup>15</sup> Probably stimulated by Calprenède's success, Jean Racine, the most important French classisist, devoted another tragedy based on Mithridates, which was published in Bourgoigne in 1673. After his early efforts *La Thébaïde* and *Alexandre le Grand*, *Mithridate* marks the zenith of Racine's career. It was Louis XIV's favourite play and it was much admired at court and in public, as quoted above in the introductory remarks.<sup>16</sup> In the preface, Racine claimed that his play is based on historical sources,<sup>17</sup> but in fact Racine only uses the names and the conflict between Rome and the Pontic Kingdom and the volte-face of Pharnakes from the ancient sources. The story concentrates on the death of Mithridates,<sup>18</sup> but it is full of love, jealousy and treachery. In his account, Pharnakes and Xiphares are sons of Mithridates by different mothers and are *frères ennemis*. Pharnakes is cast as the "bad" and Xiphares as the "good" son. They are brought together in Nymphée by the false news of their father's death. Pharnakes has no qualms about pursuing Monimé, believing his father is dead, or about

revealing Xiphares' love for her to his father, or even about betraying his father to the Romans. Upon his father's unexpected return, Xiphares is in full agreement with Monimé. Monimé refuses to marry Mithridates and remains unaffected by his pleas and threats. In the final scene, the dying Mithridates gives Monimé to Xiphares, thanking his son for providing him, as a final spectacle, with the sight of the Romans once again put to flight.

Neither the Oedipal love story, nor the killing of Mithridates by the Romans can be traced back to the ancient sources. With such basic, non-historic motives as love and hatred the plot seems to have been readily accessible to the audiences of 17th century France. At any rate, the motif of forbidden love between the son and the father's bride is evidently derived from the novel *Don Carlos*, which was published by Abbé César Vichard de Saint Real in 1672.<sup>19</sup> The motif of honourable death by suicide was appropriated from the tradition of the baroque *belle mort*<sup>20</sup> in that the historical fact that Mithridates was killed by a slave was neglected.

The principal attribute, which Racine assigns to Mithridates is virtue. With his strength of mind and unflinching courage, generosity, magnanimity and self-restraint, Racine's Mithridates very much resembles the hero of his tragedy *Alexandre le Grand*.<sup>21</sup> Thus, both these plays by Racine are seen as a celebration of the state and monarch.<sup>22</sup>

#### *Operas of the 17th and 18th centuries*

Some thirty years after its first performance, Jean Racine's tragedy was translated into Italian by Parini and set to music by Alessandro Scarlatti for the theatre San Giovanni Crisostomo in Venice. The first performance was in 1707. In the following years, a number of libretti were written and composed for operas with the names *Mitridate*, *Mitridate, rè di Ponto* and *Mitridate Eupatore* respectively by several authors.<sup>23</sup> The libretto by Benedetto Pasqualigo *Mitridate re di Ponto, vincitor di se stesso*, composed by Giovanni Maria Capelli in Venice in 1723, generally adopts Racine's model, but differs in a few details. However, Leopoldo Vilati's *Mitridate*, composed in Berlin in 1750, largely changes Racine's model. By transforming Racine's play in five parts to an opera in three stages he gives the figure of Pharnakes more importance. In a battle scene, Pharnakes leads the Romans against the troops of his father. After his defeat he is sentenced to death, a sentence later commuted to a life sentence by his father, and finally he participates in the happy end of the opera.<sup>24</sup>

More distant from Racine's play, the libretto of Frigimelica Roberti, *Mitridate Eupatore*, deals with an early episode from the biography of Mithridates. His mother Stratonica together with her lover Farnace kills her husband Mitridate Euergetes and rules the Pontic Kingdom. Later the young Mithridates kills Farnace and Stratonica together with his wife Issicratea. Mithridates ascends the throne and swears eternal hostility against Rome.<sup>25</sup>

Another aspect of Mithridates' life was acted out in the *Mitridate* of Apostolo Zeno, a love story built around his elder son Farnace with a happy ending. Zeno's libretto was very popular and adopted in various versions by several authors and composers, among them Giuseppe Sarti's *Mitridate à Sinope*, first staged in Florence in 1779.<sup>26</sup>

Vittorio Amedeo Cigna-Santi, a member of the Accademia dei Trformati in Turin, wrote a libretto for Quirino Gasparini's opera *Mitridate*, adopting largely the play of Racine.<sup>27</sup> This textbook was also the source for Mozart's first opera. When Mozart composed it he was only fourteen years old.<sup>28</sup> Mozart's *Mitridate, re di Ponto* remains the best known among the more than twentyfive Mithridates-operas. Racine's tragedy was only slightly changed:<sup>29</sup> Monimé becomes Aspasia, Phoedime and Arcas are omitted, but the motif of the Oedipal love story originally adopted from Don Carlos remains. New figures such as the Roman tribune Marzio and the Parthian Princess Ismene are incorporated without changing the original dramaturgy of Racine.

Aspasia, betrothed to Mithridates, is loved by his two sons, Pharnakes and Xiphares, but she reciprocates the love of the latter. Pharnakes conspires with the Roman Marcius against his father, but Mithridates, rumoured dead in his struggle against the Romans, returns, fearing the disloyalty of both of his sons, but is reassured by Arbates (the Governor of Nymphaea) of the loyalty of Xiphares. Pharnakes is betrothed to the Parthian princess Ismene, whom he rejects, and Mithridates, now about to renew his war against Pompeius, distrusts Aspasia and imprisons both his sons when Pharnakes reveals the love of Xiphares for Aspasia, although Xiphares has honourably decided to leave Aspasia and Pontos. Aspasia now rejects Mithridates, who sends her poison, which Xiphares stops her from drinking. In battle, the king is victorious against the Romans but is mortally wounded, and returns to unite Aspasia and Xiphares and to forgive Pharnakes, whom he joins with Ismene in marriage.

The opera won an enthusiastic reception in Milano and other European centres, Mithridates' name was celebrated more than ever.<sup>30</sup> The operas of the 18th century present Mithridates as the tragic heroic monarch. Despite some dark sides of his character, Mithridates is conveyed as a great ruler showing his illustrious death at peace with his perfidious son Pharnakes.

### *Mithridates in scholarly literature*

#### Charles Rollin's *Histoire Romaine*

After the 17th century, Roman history became common knowledge. Historians engaged in systematic studies in order to discover the role of the personality in history. Charles Rollin's multi-volume *Histoire Romaine* appeared in the 1730's and went through many editions in both French and English during the course of the century.<sup>31</sup> His narrative account is largely based on ancient sources although it is avowedly complicated, uncritical and somewhat inac-



Fig. 3. "La mort de Mithridate", engraving by Gravelot.

curate. Volume eight includes the Mithridatic Wars, in which the personality of Mithridates is considered.

In general terms, Rollin portrays the Pontic king as a virtuous ruler and the greatest enemy of the Romans. The dark sides of the character of the Pontic king are not hidden, but Rollin does not display a tendency to characterize Mithridates as a bloodthirsty brute, as later, especially in the 19th century, historians do. He depicts the negative and positive traits of the personality of the king referring to an anecdote during the siege of Rhodes. The story is told by Valerius Maximus (5.2) and is accepted as authentic by Rollin:<sup>32</sup>

"Pendant ce siège, deux traits nous donnent lieu de remarquer dans Mithridate un caractère prompt à la vengeance, mais reconnaissant des services qui lui avaient été rendus. Dans le combat naval dont il a été fait mention, pendant que Mithridate fait avancer son vaisseau tantôt vers un endroit, tantôt vers l'autre, pour animer les siens, ou leur donner du secours, un vaisseau de sa flotte, qui était de l'île de Chio, par la malhabileté sans doute de ceux qui le montaient, vient frapper le sien et le met en quelque danger. Le roi irrité fit pendre le pilote et contre-maître, et étendit dans la suite les effets de sa colère sur tout l'île de Chio, comme nous dirons en son lieu. Cette rigueur est sans doute condamnable; mais on peut s'empêcher de louer beaucoup ce qu'il fit par rapport à Leonicus, sujet fidèle, qui avait témoigné un grand zèle pour





Fig. 4. “Bachide Eunuco invitata da Mitridate a Monimé”, engraving by Bartolomeo Pinelli (after Colonna 2006, 229).

son prince dans des occasions périlleuses. Ce Léonicus ayant été pris dans quelqu’une des actions de ce siège, Mithridate, pour le ravoir seul, rendit tous les prisonniers rhodiens qu’il avait dans son camp”. In this passage Rollin contrasts the Pontic king’s lack of self-control, his cruel and unrestrained behaviour with his gratitude and generosity, and in doing so he assesses the personality of Mithridates more objectively.

Rollin’s *Histoire romaine* was much read in the 18th and 19th century and at the same time a source for neo-classicists’ visual interpretations of history.<sup>33</sup> Many European painters, sculptures and engravers undertook commissions to illustrate scenes from history reading Rollin’s narratives on the scenes they wished to represent. The French artist Gravelot engraved a book illustration, which conveys the dramatic dying scene of Mithridates (Fig. 3). The old king is sitting on a *kline* in his palace surrounded by three dead women with two soldiers attacking him. Mithridates is about to be killed by a spear. Stretching his right arm forwards the king seems to be craving his speedy death. A kantharos-like vessel and a kylix on the table next to the *kline* refer to the Mithridates’ attempted suicide, which was unsuccessful because of his immunity to poison. Renouncing historical accuracy the artist combines in his illustration the death of Mithridates in Pantikapaion with the mass murder of his family in Pharnakeia. New archaeological discoveries of the 18th cen-

ture enabled the artist to seek to recreate the world of antiquity using ancient architectural elements, furniture, clothing, and other accessories.

The Italian artist Bartolemeo Pinelli also read Rollin and drew inspiration from his reading.<sup>34</sup> His famous series *Istoria romana* (1816) consists of endless illustrations of historical events in ancient Rome. Concerning the story of Mithridates, Pinelli did not draw the death of the Pontic king, but the death of his favourite wife Monime in Pharnakeia (Fig. 4). On the basis of the narratives of Plutarch (Luc. 18.2-6) and Appianos (*Mith.* 12, 82), Rollin recounts the story dramatically: The eunuch Bacchides communicated the order of the king to Monime that she had the choice of whatever manner she might deem easiest and most painless. Monime snatched the diadem from her head, fastened it round her neck, and hanged herself. But her diadem quickly broke in two. Following this unsuccessful suicide attempt she cried: "O cursed bauble, could you not serve me even in this office?". Pinelli illustrates exactly this last scene: Monime sits on the *kline*. Her gesture with the open right hand indicates that she has just thrown the diadem away, which lies underfoot. It is interesting to note that Bacchides is portrayed as a brutal hangman carrying a strange dagger with a pointed blade.

#### *Mithridates in Mommsen's Römische Geschichte*

In the course of the 19th century, scholarly interest in the historical personality of Mithridates increased. Several doctoral dissertations were written at German universities and biographical articles were devoted to Mithridates.<sup>35</sup> But it was Theodor Mommsen who first opened the way for a new perception of the Pontic king. Mommsen, the greatest historian of antiquity in the 19th century, wrote the three volumes of his narrative account of Roman history up to 46 BC in the 1850's. For this achievement he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1902.

The contradictory aspects of Mommsen's view of the Roman Empire, his preconceptions and political convictions have been discussed in all their complexity by Alfred Heuss and George Peabody Gooch.<sup>36</sup> There is no need to repeat them here. I will only give a brief overview of Mommsen's perception of Mithridates.

Chapter 8 of the fourth book (volume two) of the *Römische Geschichte* (devoted to the Mithridatic Wars) contains the hardest criticism of Mithridates ever formulated up to the date of its publication. Mommsen describes the Pontic king as a voluptuous, dissipated, violent oriental ruler. Comparing him to Ottoman rulers such as Mehmed II and Suleiman the Magnificent, he frequently calls him sultan.<sup>37</sup> What the German historian criticizes in Mithridates was mainly his lack of capacity to rule: "This strange combination of a policy of peace at any price with a policy of conquest was certainly in itself untenable, and was simply a fresh proof that Mithridates did not belong to the class of genuine statesmen; he knew neither how to prepare for conflict like king

Philip nor how to submit like king Attalus, but in the true style of a sultan was perpetually fluctuating between a greedy desire of conquest and the sense of his own weakness". Mithridates is accused of being a false philhellene. In Mommsen's mind, Mithridates only pretended to have an interest in Greek culture in order to influence the Greek population of Asia Minor. Mommsen interprets Mithridates' fondness for Greek literature and art as oriental pomp and remarks: "He, Mithridates, satisfied his intellectual needs with superstition and dream readings. His interest for Greek mysteries was only a raw adoption of Hellenic civilization. He liked Greek art and music, this meant he merely collected precious objects: "Such a person he was; he resembled a sultan".<sup>38</sup> All faults of the Pontic king were identified as typical oriental characteristics. Here the author is referring to the Ephesian Vesper: "The horrible orders were except for in a few districts, such as the island of Cos punctually executed, and eighty, or according to other accounts, one hundred and fifty thousand innocent and defenceless men, women, and children were slaughtered in cold blood in one day in Asia Minor; a fearful execution, in which a good opportunity for getting rid of debts and the Asiatic servile willingness to perform any executioner's office at the bidding of the sultan played at least as much part as the comparatively noble feeling of revenge". Further on, Mommsen adds: "This Ephesian massacre was altogether a mere meaningless act of brutally blind revenge, which obtained a false semblance of grandeur simply through the colossal proportions in which the character of sultanic rule was displayed. The sultan again resorted to the most violent expedients".<sup>39</sup> In fact, such strongly negative attitudes towards Mithridates are lacking in the Roman tradition. To the best of my knowledge, there is no precedent for the depiction of Mithridates as an inhuman Turkish sultan who tortures to death his opponents and even his own mother, brothers and sons. Mommsen's concept is simple: Mithridates was an opponent of Rome, an enemy of civilization, as much as the Turks were the enemies of modern Western culture.

Mommsen's concept, however, contained a dilemma. Ruthlessness and bloodiness and polygamy were by no means only oriental features and were quite usual in the Greek and Roman world. The Macedonian king Alexander the Great, often glorified by modern historians, not only killed many thousands of Persians, but also murdered his best friends and other antagonistic Greeks.<sup>40</sup> Likewise some Roman emperors, especially the Julio-Claudians, murdered even their own mothers, sisters and brothers. Mommsen avoided facing these questions. He never wrote the fourth volume of his work on the imperial period. Skipping the principate,<sup>41</sup> his *Römische Geschichte* continues with Late Antiquity.

The lack of interest in Mommsen's views on the age of the emperors and his unwillingness to complete his *Römische Geschichte* have been commented on felicitously by the East German writer Heiner Müller in a poem, in which he compares it with his own writer's block in the aftermath of the collapse of socialism:<sup>42</sup>

I understood for the first time your writer's block  
 Comrade Professor with respect to the age of the Caesars  
 As is commonly known  
 The happy era of Nero  
 Knowing the unwritten text to be a wound from which the blood  
 comes that nurses no fame  
 And the gasping lacuna in your historical work  
 Was a physical pain in my  
 How much longer breathing body<sup>43</sup>

Mommsen's reception of Mithridates as a cruel voluptuous Ottoman sultan fits perfectly to an orientalist worldview, which presupposes an ambivalent fixity in the difference between "Europeans" and "Orientals" in the scholarly and popular thinking of the 19th century.<sup>44</sup> In fact, Theodor Mommsen was no exception to this approach. Eduard Meyer, who was Mommsen's son in law, also adopts the concept of the oriental ruler Mithridates in his habilitation thesis, *Geschichte des Königreichs Pontus*, published in 1879. Comparing him with Harun-al-Reshid, Meyer reproduces Mommsen's negative image of Mithridates.<sup>45</sup> This negative reception of Mithridates was also shared by Théodore Reinach in his well-known biography of Mithridates published in 1890 (German translation in 1895).<sup>46</sup> Accentuating the "ungreekness" of Mithridates, Reinach remarks that the image of the king on the coins also differs from the perfect profiles of the Greeks. His broad nostrils, thick lips and fleshy chin demonstrate, according to Reinach, the self-indulgence of a sultan.<sup>47</sup> Contrary to Mommsen, Reinach does not question the intellectual capacities of the Pontic king, in particular his multilingualism, but Mithridates differs exactly in this linguistic competence from other Hellenistic kings who usually only spoke Greek.<sup>48</sup> Reinach concludes that the Pontic king was not only opposed to the Romans but was also an enemy of European culture.<sup>49</sup> It is surely traces of this tradition which occur when in the *Griechische Geschichte* by Hermann Bengtson first published in 1956, we still read the following comment: "the plan of the Ephesian Vesper could only be conceived in the brain of an Asiatic barbarian".<sup>50</sup>

The latest appearance of the reception of Mithridates as a "sanguine, oriental sultan" is to be found in the narrative biographical account *Mitridate. Il nemico mortale di Roma* published by Giuseppe Antonelli in 1992. Interestingly, Antonelli's book contains illustrations of many Hittite and Assyrian and other oriental monuments apparently in order to show that Mithridates belonged to the world of the ancient Near East. It is still on the basis of this tradition that Italian journalists compare Mithridates with Osama Bin Laden in discussing the Roman analogies for "American Empire" in newspapers and magazines.<sup>51</sup>



*Mithridates in the 20th century*

In general, the 20th century image of Mithridates has been more positive. The few negative judgments of him have largely been survivals of the 19th century tradition noted previously. It was particularly during the second half of the twentieth century that the oriental sultan Mithridates gradually disappeared. Inverting the 19th century concept a new image of Mithridates as the Greek liberator from Roman repression has been constructed. In the political context of post-war Germany, Alfred Heuss, after dealing with Mommsen's formation as a historian of the 19th century,<sup>52</sup> remarks in his *Römische Geschichte*, first published in 1960, that Mithridates was indeed not a barbarian, rather, he only had the liberation of Greek civilization in mind.<sup>53</sup>

The historical novelist Alfred Duggan published a much-read biography of Mithridates in 1958 and used the final line of Houseman's poem as his title "He died old, Mithridates Eupator, King of Pontus". Duggan even contrasts the civilized Greek king Mithridates with the bloody-minded Romans and in the prologue of his book remarks: "In the course of their amazing expansion, the Romans collided with peoples of an older culture, peoples who had learned the good life and could live it, in everything but military skill superior to the blunt, uncouth farmers of central Italy. To the Hellenised East, Rome could offer nothing but the grasping hand of the tax-farmer and the blood-drinking sword of the legionary. Especially in Asia Minor the Romans were resisted, by civilized men who regarded them as savages. This is a study of the greatest hero of that resistance".<sup>54</sup>

Some Greek scholars present Mithridates as the last advocate of Greek civilization in the Black Sea region.<sup>55</sup> Drawing parallels between enemies past and present, that is to say between the Romans and the Turks, the latter are now accused of having eliminated Greek culture in Pontos once and for all in 1922 and Mithridates has been considered as the forerunner of the Pontic Greeks and their ambitions.

In a trend that began in the 1980's, scholars have begun to investigate and review the traditional concepts, and now seek to draw a more coherent and objective picture of Mithridates.<sup>56</sup> Nowadays however, this seems only to be of interest to the academic community. Mithridates is among the historical figures, who no longer inspire interest in wider circles. There are neither exhibitions nor television documentaries nor movies about Mithridates. To my knowledge, the only popular account of Mithridates that has appeared in recent years is Michael Curtis Ford's novel *The Last King. Rome's Greatest Enemy* (2004). Recounting the tale from the perspective of Pharnakes, Ford presents Mithridates as a brilliant king and as the greatest enemy who ever faced the Romans. Through Pharnakes' eyes, we see how Mithridates sought to create a "New Greece" in Asia Minor as a cultural alternative to the Roman Republic's rapidly expanding empire.

### Conclusion

A critical appraisal of scholarly and popular writings over five centuries reveals clearly the qualitative and quantitative differences in various receptions of the Pontic king, even though the available textual sources remained unchanged.

By the end of the 14th century the historical person of Mithridates becomes popular with the work of Boccaccio on the “fate of illustrious men”. In the 15th and 16th century the image of Mithridates alters from being an allegory of multilingualism to a metaphor for toxicology. Tragedies and operas of the 17th and 18th centuries concentrate on the death of Mithridates. The scene of the dying Mithridates – exemplifying his tragic fate – is without a doubt the most popular subject. Among some twentyfive operas based on Jean Racine’s libretto from the 1807 work of Alessandro Scarlatti onwards, Mozart’s *Mitridate, re di Ponto* remains the best known. From Theodor Mommsen to Théodore Reinach, scholarship judged Mithridates as a cruel oriental ruler, comparing him with Ottoman sultans through an orientalist worldview. However, since the second half of the 20th century scholars react against this negative tendency by qualifying disapproving comments in the Roman written sources. In scholarly and popular writings, from the middle of the 20th century onwards, the image of Mithridates is transformed from that of grand enemy of the Romans and Western civilization to liberator of Hellenism.

Both sides of the character of Mithridates, positive and negative, are always present though accentuated differently. The judgements of modern historians on the personality of Mithridates differ strongly although their historical research is based on the same primary sources. This leads us to assume tentatively that positive and negative receptions of Mithridates were emphasised for ideological reasons. Without exceeding oversimplification, I suggest that the Pontic king was little more than a pretext, an abstract pattern which anyone could alter to fit the particular shape dictated by political circumstances, individual convictions and prejudices. This does not deny the value of previous scholarship but encourages moving away from the ideological concepts oscillating between the poles oriental despot and Greek liberator to new approaches to the study of the last Pontic king. Critical review of the past portrayals of Mithridates and how these were perceived by the public can make us more conscious about the cultural and political biases of our own times.

### Notes

- 1 In this paper I will not pursue my subject chronologically but rather take a more thematic approach and consider the contexts in which the name of Mithridates appears. A complete compilation of available material is not intended.
- 2 Plin. *HN* 7.24.28; 25.3.6; Quint. 9.2.50.
- 3 Braun 1990.

- 4 Adelung 1806.
- 5 Tarabant 2003, 9.
- 6 Watson 1966, 33-43.
- 7 Just. *Epit.* 37.2: "During his boyhood his life was attempted by plots on the part of his guardians, who, mounting him on a restive horse, forced him to ride and hurl the javelin; but when these attempts failed, as his management of the horse was superior to his years, they tried to cut him off by poison. He, however, being on his guard against such treachery, frequently took antidotes, and so fortified himself, by exquisite preventives, against their malice, that when he was an old man, and wished to die by poison, he was unable".
- 8 Plin. *HN* 29.24-25: "The Mithridatic antidote is composed of fifty-four ingredients, no two of them having the same weight, while of some is prescribed one sixtieth part of one denarius. Which of the gods, in the name of Truth, fixed these absurd proportions? No human brain could have been sharp enough. It is plainly a showy parade of the art, and a colossal boast of science". Further remarks of ancient authors on Mithridatic antidote: Cass. Dio 37.13; Gell. 17.16; App. *Mith.* 16, 111.
- 9 Mithridatizing has been used as a plot in the popular literature, among others Alexandre Dumas' *The Count of Monte Cristo*; Yoshiaki Kawajiri's *Ninja Scroll*; Agatha Christie's *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* and William Goldman's *The Princess Bride*.
- 10 Houseman 1896, "Terence, This is Stupid Stuff" (lines 59-76):

There was a king reigned in the East:  
 There, when kings will sit to feast,  
 They get their fill before they think  
 With poisoned meat and poisoned drink.  
 He gathered all that springs to birth  
 From the many-venomed earth;  
 First a little, thence to more,  
 He sampled all her killing store;  
 And easy, smiling, seasoned sound,  
 Sate the king when health went round.  
 They put arsenic in his meat  
 And stared aghast to watch him eat;  
 They poured strychnine in his cup  
 And shook to see him drink it up:  
 They shook, they stared as white's their shirt:  
 Them it was their poison hurt  
 - I tell the tale that I heard told.  
 Mithridates, he died old.

- 11 Emerson 1847:

I cannot spare water or wine,  
 Tobacco-leaf, or poppy, or rose;  
 From the earth-poles to the Line,  
 All between that works or grows,  
 Every thing is kin of mine.

Give me agates for my meat,  
 Give me cantharids to eat,  
 From air and ocean bring me foods,  
 From all zones and altitudes.

From all natures, sharp and slimy,  
 Salt and basalt, wild and tame,  
 Tree, and lichen, ape, sea-lion,  
 Bird and reptile be my game.

Ivy for my fillet band,  
 Blinding dogwood in my hand,  
 Hemlock for my sherbet cull me,  
 And the prussic juice to lull me,  
 Swing me in the upas boughs,  
 Vampire-fanned, when I carouse.

Too long shut in strait and few,  
 Thinly dieted on dew,  
 I will use the world, and sift it,  
 To a thousand humors shift it,  
 As you spin a cherry.  
 O doleful ghosts, and goblins merry,  
 O all you virtues, methods, might;  
 Means, appliances, delights;  
 Reputed wrongs, and braggart rights;  
 Smug routine, and things allowed;  
 Minorities, things under cloud!  
 Hither! take me, use me, fill me,  
 Vein and artery, though ye kill me;  
 God! I will not be an owl,  
 But sun me in the Capitol.

- 12 Boccaccio 1400.
- 13 Corbellini 1604.
- 14 The English playwrights Nathaniel Lee and John Dryden should also be noted, see Haupt 1916.
- 15 Rosendorfer (2003, 179) is wrong when he states that the name of Mithridates first appeared in the play of La Calprenède in 1637. As has been noted above, it was in the play by the Italian dramatist Arelino Corbellini in 1604.
- 16 Kuizenga 1978, 280.
- 17 Racine refers to Florus, Plutarch, Cassius Dio and Appianos.
- 18 Racine (III,17): "la morte de Mithridate est l'action de ma tragedie".
- 19 Rosendorfer 2003, 180.
- 20 Kuizenga 1978, 282.
- 21 Kuizenga 1978, 284-285.
- 22 Kuizenga 1978, 282.
- 23 Rosendorfer 2003, 179-180.
- 24 Adlung 1996, 33.



- 25 Apparently ignoring the written tradition on the early biography of Mithridates, Adlung (1996, 34) thinks that this story confusingly combines the motifs from the *Choephoroe* by Aischylos and *Elektra* by Sophokles and Eurypides: “Mitridate Eupatore wird Orest, Stratonica Klytämnestra, Laodice Elektra und Farnace Aegisth”.
- 26 Adlung 1996, 34.
- 27 The supposition, often referred to in the literature (latest by Rosendorfer 2003, 180), that Cigna-Santi reworked the translation of Racine’s play by Giuseppe Parini, is according to Adlung (1996, 35) wrong.
- 28 Adlung 1996; Rosendorfer 2003, 177-195.
- 29 Apparently the wider audience was able to recognise the similarities with Racine’s play, since in the epitome of the debut performance it is noted: “Veggasi la Tragedia del Francese Racine, che si è in molte parti imitate”. Cited after Rosendorfer 2003, 181.
- 30 Mozart’s *Mitridate* has again become popular and has often been staged in recent years; latest at the 2006 *Salzburger Festspiele* staged by Günter Krämer.
- 31 Rollin 1823, 226-392.
- 32 Rollin 1823, 255-256.
- 33 Walch 1967, 123-126.
- 34 Colonna 2006, 32-36.
- 35 Reinach (1895, 1) refers to the dissertations on Mithridates written in German universities in the first half of the 19th century: J.E. Woltersdorf, *Commentatio vitam Mithridates per annos digestam sistens* (1813) and F.J. Volpert, *De regno pontico eiusque principibus ad regemque Mithridates VI* (Münster 1853). P.S. Frandsen wrote four books on *Mithridates Eupator VI, König von Pontos*, but only the first book was ever published. The Greek author Sourias wrote a short story about Mithridates in Modern Greek, published in 1878. Louis Claude de Saint-Martin portrayed Mithridates in his *Biographie Universelle* supposedly using only Armenian sources according to Reinach.
- 36 Heuss 1956; Gooch 1956.
- 37 Mommsen 1854-1856, II, 280-281.
- 38 Mommsen 1854-1856, II, 268.
- 39 Mommsen 1854-1856, II, 285-286.
- 40 Cruel killings, such as the killing of the Indian mercenaries and the execution of Philotas, Parmenion and Kallisthenes, Klitos, and other negative characteristics, such as his excessive drinking, lack of self-restraint and obeisance were also recorded about Alexander by several ancient authors: Plut. *Alex.* 51.5; Cic. *Att.* 12.28.3; Vell. Pat. A very harsh criticism of Alexander the Great was formulated by Seneca (*Q nat.* 6.23.2-3) defending the memory of Kallisthenes: “he (Kallisthenes) had outstanding intelligence and did not submit to the range of his king. The murder of Callisthenes is the everlasting crime of Alexander, which no virtue, no success in war, will redeem: For when someone says, “Alexander killed many thousands of Persians”, the countering reply to him will be “And Callisthenes too”. Whenever it is said, “Alexander killed Darius, who had the greatest kingdom at that time” the reply will be “And Callisthenes too”. Whenever it is said, “He conquered everything on the way to the ocean and even made an attack on the ocean itself with ships unknown to that water; and he extended his empire from a corner of Thrace all the way to the farthest boundaries of the achievements in antiquity of generals and kings, of the things he did nothing will be so great as

- his crimes". Arrianos (*Anab.* 4.14.2) records that Hermolaus, who was accused of having conspired against Alexander, said that "no free man could endure Alexander's arrogance".
- 41 Notes taken during his lectures on the Roman Empire between 1863 and 1886 were published under the title *Römische Kaisergeschichte* in 1992. In the view of Mommsen's son-in-law Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Noellendorf, their academic level was such that their publication would have been an embarrassment. In 1885 a presentation of the Roman provinces in the imperial period appeared as volume 5 of *Römische Geschichte: Die Provinzen von Caesar bis Diocletian*.
- 42 Müller 1993, 1-9.
- 43 English translation by B. Demandt, cited after Wiedemann 1997.
- 44 The concept of orientalism was articulated by Edward Said (1978) in his groundbreaking work *Orientalism*. According to Said, Western scholars affected by the attitudes of the era of European imperialism in the 18th and 19th centuries constructed knowledge about the "Orient" as a negative inversion of Western culture. Thus, the negative image of the "Oriental" Mithridates was constructed in scholarly writing through the discourse of the difference between the "Orient" and the "Occident". Orientalism was possibly also shaped by the theories of racial difference between Orientals and Europeans. In the mid-1850's Comte Arthur de Gobineau (1853-1855) published his *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines*.
- 45 Meyer 1879, 86: "Charakteristisch ist auch, dass er (Mithridates, den Vater einer neuen Geliebten, einen armen Zitherspieler, mit dem Geschenke der Wohnung und Habe eines eben Verstorbenen überraschte) ein Zug, der an die Geschichten von Harun al Raschid erinnert".
- 46 Reinach 1895, 277: "So ist Mithridates an Größe und Bedeutung weit mehr als ein Sultan, aber dennoch bildet der Sultan den Grundzug seines Wesens, mit seinen heftig auflodernde Zornesausbrüchen, seiner glühenden, ungezügeln Sinnlichkeit, die in plötzlicher Wallung ihre sofortige Befriedung erheischt".
- 47 Reinach 1895, 274: "die etwas dicke Lippe und das fleischige Kinn verraten Genußsucht, aber die ragende Braue, die gewölbte Stirn, das in unheimlichen Feuer zu glühen scheint, alles dies vermählt sich zu einem einheitlichen Ganzen, das von Geist und Thatkraft strahlt und in welchem der Sultan hinter dem Krieger und Staatsmann verschwindet". See also Reinach 1888, 248.
- 48 Reinach 1895, 276.
- 49 Reinach 1895, 295.
- 50 Bengston 1986, 489.
- 51 E. Vigna, "Ma L'impero Americano è come quello Romano?", *Sette Corriera della Sera*, n. 13, 2003, 33-43. Cited after Wyke 2006, 305, 320, n. 2.
- 52 Heuss 1956.
- 53 Heuss 2003, 258: "Mithridates war kein Barbar, vielmehr von jeher darauf gesonnen, sich die Ausstattung mit der damaligen Zivilisation, welche aber eine griechische und nun mit der Zeit schon eine griechisch römische war, zu verschaffen".
- 54 Duggan 1958, 9.
- 55 Lampsides 1957; Tourlidis 1985, 130-142.
- 56 McGing 1986; Portanova 1988; Ballesteros-Pastor 1996; Stefanidou 2002.

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