

adoptions mentioned in our sources, starting with the consuls of 179 BC, L. Manlius Acidinus Fulvianus and Q. Fulvius Flaccus (*fratres germani* according to the interesting annotation in the Capitoline Fasti); the discussion of this case must seem a bit obscure to some readers, as the author omits to mention that Manlius Acidinus the adopter was a patrician (this is, however, mentioned on p. 171 in another context in Ch. 13 on "Political adoptions in the Republic", the contents of which could perhaps have been integrated into this chapter), thus making his adoptive son also a patrician, from which it followed that the son could hold the consulate together with his plebeian brother Fulvius (it is only from 172 onwards that two plebeians could hold the consulate together). This chapter also includes a review of various relatives – grandfathers, uncles, etc. – attested as adopters.

The book finishes with the following chapters: 12 (again) on testamentary adoptions (this chapter being "a review of some known cases"); 13 on "Political adoptions in the Republic", which, as mentioned above, could perhaps have been integrated into Ch. 11 (the term "political" here means, as in Ch. 16, that we are dealing with adoptions within the upper classes aiming, or at least interpreted to aim, to further "political" aspirations); 14 on the adoption of P. Clodius; 15 on that of Octavian; and finally 16 on a surprisingly broad topic, called as it is "Political adoptions in the early Empire at Rome, Pompeii and Ostia; the imperial family" – there is much of interest here (although the exact point of the mention of the two Cartilii p. 196 escapes me).

Having just mentioned that there is much of interest in Ch. 16, I must point out that the same goes for much of the whole book. However, as I have been trying to show above, there are also passages in which I feel that the author has not been at his best, and, to repeat what I said above, there is much, perhaps according to some readers too much, that seems to have been written in a hurry. Moreover, the author should have furnished the exact details, with sources and discussion, in many cases in which we now have only references to other studies. And one more thing: a list of the most important known adoptions, with quotations from the sources, would in my view have been useful. (I may perhaps be allowed to add that, when writing this review, I could unfortunately not have a look Christiane Kunst's 2005 study on the same topic in German, as the local University library has somehow "lost" its copy of the book).

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ADRIENNE MAYOR: *The Poison King. The Life and Legend of Mithradates, Rome's Deadliest Enemy*. Princeton University Press, Princeton – Oxford 2010. ISBN 978-0-691-12683-8. XXII, 448 pp. USD 29.95.

In this entertaining and intriguing biography that combines history and fiction, Mayor attempts to reconstruct the story of Mithradates VI Eupator. Mayor claims that, in the modern West, Mithradates' name is relatively unfamiliar although he was one of Rome's most formidable opponents. With current events in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea region being what they are, she considers that peoples living in this area are starting to recall the name of the king that once "resisted Western encroachment" (p. 3). Indeed, for Mayor the war between Mithradates and Rome represents an encounter between the East and the West par excellence. Mayor's aim is to tell the king's side of the story regardless of the fact that the ancient sources

are written from the Roman point of view. Her other sources consist of archaeological, artistic, epigraphic and numismatic material. Mayor's method is to try to reconstruct Mithradates' vicissitudes by applying "the scientific use of the imagination to fill in the spaces between surviving accounts and contextual facts" (p. 5). Mayor states that her approach is different from historical fiction, in which writers are free to modify the known facts of history. Mayor promises to identify clearly the instances where she has used her imagination in lieu of missing sources.

As the title suggests, Mayor gives considerable emphasis to the king's supposed interest in pharmacology and poisons while also taking into account not only the king's life but also his afterlife in literature, arts and popular culture. However, the prominence of Mithradates' toxicological experiments almost in every chapter feels somewhat awkward. It is understandable that Mayor as an expert in ancient poisons wants to highlight this interesting aspect of Mithradates, but one might question the necessity to give him the title 'Poison King'.

The structure of the book is more or less chronological in fifteen chapters. The first chapter narrates the mass killing of Romans in Anatolia in 88 BC, the "Asiatic Vespers", and laudably analyses the events but also makes comparisons with other similar massacres in history. The author certainly succeeds in this first striking chapter to draw the reader's attention to what follows. Starting from the second chapter, Mayor recounts Mithradates' life chronologically from birth to death. In addition to this, Mayor deals with the history and geography of Pontus and the surrounding areas, and with the Romans' relationship with the Hellenistic East.

Mayor is without doubt a masterful narrator with an ability to create vivid descriptions of past events and to bring historical characters alive. She has been able to make use of all ancient sources on, and modern studies of, Mithradates, and also successfully sets episodes of his life against a number of modern phenomena. The author says that the story of Mithradates seems like a fairytale, and it is indeed most entertaining to read her narration of the king's birth, youth and struggle against the Romans coloured by celestial omens and constant life-threatening dangers. Mayor has created an extremely charismatic and romanticized image of Mithradates.

However, I have to criticize the way Mayor uses her sources and combines history and fiction. For example, Mayor seems to think that the speeches by Mithradates recorded in ancient historiography could actually be real speeches of the king instead of the creations of historians (pp. 142, 144, 159, 176). The same goes for the letter of Mithradates referred to by Sallust (p. 305). It is understandable that for maximum narrative effect, Mayor wants to treat them as the possible utterances of Mithradates himself, but to me this procedure seems dangerously uncritical. Moreover, it is not altogether accurate to talk about 'facts' (pp. 1, 5, 76, 123: "based on the facts recorded by Justin") recorded by ancient historians as if everything they wrote was equally valuable and trustworthy. By not differentiating and evaluating her various literary sources, Mayor is merging actual facts, probabilities and complete fiction in a dangerous mix, especially from the point of view of readers unfamiliar with the nature of sources for ancient history. Mayor promises in the introduction to clearly identify the points where she has had to use some imagination, but this does not seem to be evident everywhere.

Mayor's one-sided way of describing historical events also stands out uncomfortably. Possibly because of her aim to tell Mithradates' side of the story, Mayor is constantly inclined to describe the Romans as greedy imperialists who wanted all along to conquer and enslave the whole Greek World, which they, in reality, probably did not systematically aim to do in the second century BC. She writes: "By the time Mithradates assumed his throne, Rome had

transformed itself into a war machine, oiled with blood and plunder, ravenous for more slaves, more land, more riches: too much was not enough" (p. 110, see also pp. 36, 105, 173–4). She certainly makes it quite clear whose side she is on: "Mithradates' farsighted vision offered a positive alternative to Rome's rapacious greed and violent resource extraction in its early period of conquest" (p. 119) and "To oppose the Romans was to fight on the side of Truth and Light" (p. 47). Mayor also describes Mithradates as the liberator of Greece from the Romans, but does not mention that the Romans and many other kings before Mithradates used the same popular 'freedom propaganda' when they fought wars in Greece. This was thus nothing new in the age of Mithradates. As a result, the image the author provides of the complex relationship between Rome and the East in that period is overly simple and one-sided, even misleading.

In conclusion, Adrienne Mayor's *The Poison King* is a captivating and well-written story of Mithradates VI Eupator, and it is certainly good that this important historical character is presented to a wider audience. However, my concern lies in the way the book mixes history and fiction, and how it uses ancient sources. Having said that, the book is a useful introduction to students of classical history who are looking for sources and an up-to-date bibliography regarding Mithradates. More experienced scholars should probably look elsewhere.

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FRANCESCA ROHR VIO: *Publio Ventidio Basso. Fautor Caesaris, tra storia e memoria*. Monografie del Centro Ricerche di Documentazione sull'Antichità Classica 31. "L'Erma" di Bretschneider, Roma 2009. ISBN 978-88-8265-564-8. 210 pp., ill. b/n, 4 tavv. EUR 110.

Saggio storico-biografico su Publio Ventidio Basso, *homo novus* originario del Piceno, che ebbe un ruolo rilevante in ambito politico e strategico-militare, prima vicino a Cesare, poi, dopo le idi di marzo, dalla parte di Marco Antonio. Egli, da bambino esibito in catene tra i prigionieri durante il trionfo di Pompeo Strabone *de Asculaneis Picentibus*, giunse da adulto alla massima magistratura repubblicana e fu celebrato come primo *triumphator ex Parthis*.

Grazie all'analisi critica delle notizie biografiche sull'individuo, che sono fornite in buona parte da fonti scritte, l'autrice può non solo offrire una lettura aggiornata e completa sulla vita di Ventidio, ma anche contribuire ad arricchire le conoscenze riguardanti fatti e giochi di potere del periodo triumvirale. Si tratta, come ella evidenzia nella premessa, di un'ottica che si discosta da quella tradizionalmente adottata dalla storiografia moderna sul secondo triumvirato la quale, invece, si occupa soprattutto delle figure dei triumviri. L'argomento trattato si inserisce appieno tra gli interessi di studio dell'autrice, ricercatore di Storia romana presso l'Università Ca' Foscari di Venezia, la quale si è occupata di temi che riguardano la comunicazione politica e le dinamiche oppositorie di età triumvirale e augustea.

Il saggio si compone di una premessa, di cinque capitoli e di considerazioni conclusive. Ciascun capitolo, tranne il quinto, è introdotto da una citazione di Aulo Gellio, con traduzione in italiano della stessa autrice.

Nella premessa vi sono indicazioni sullo scopo dell'opera, informazioni di carattere generale sul contesto storico e sul protagonista, una storia degli studi sull'argomento e una rassegna delle fonti storiche di riferimento.