

Beyond Hatred: Reassessing Agency and Tracing Policy in Mithridates' Occupation of Western Anatolia

Only recently has scholarship stopped portraying Rome's enemies as demagogues and begun exploring the social composition and agency of their supporters. Mithridates, often remembered for his role in the infamous Asian Vespers, provides a particularly rich case for this shift in perspective.

In the winter of 89/8 BCE, tens of thousands of Italian residents were killed across western Anatolia, just one generation after the region's provincialization. The massacre has been attributed either to Mithridates' propaganda (McGing 1986, Kallet-Marx 1994, Gatzke 2013) or as a grassroots uprising of the lower classes reacting against Roman financial exploitation (Kallet-Marx 1995; Arslan 2007). Some scholars have reduced Mithridates' role to shift responsibility elsewhere. However, neither approach fully captures the local groups who benefited most from aligning with Mithridates. This paper proposes an inversion of perspective: to understand the dynamics behind the Vespers, we must focus on the political elements within Mithridates' agenda that resonated locally.

An Ephesian decree from the end of the First Mithridatic War (86/85 BCE, Syll3 742II) offers insight. It awarded enfranchisement and debt forgiveness to those who voluntarily joined the military—terms Appian also associates with Mithridates' broader policies (Mith. 22/86; 48/190). While the community's need for manpower might explain the decree, this explanation alone is insufficient. In other cities like Aphrodisias, military enrollment could be coerced without compensation (Reynolds 1982: 2 = SEG 34, 1043). Even when rewards were given, such as in Pergamum's citizenship grant during the Aristonicus revolt (IvP I, 249 = OGIS 338), the rewards were less substantial.

I argue that the Ephesian decree was not simply a local response but part of a broader bidding war for allegiance driven by Mithridates' policies. His program offered a new social contract aimed at all levels of the community. By canceling debts, Mithridates appealed to citizens, who held significant loans, while compensating unenfranchised creditors with monetary refunds

(Callataÿ 1997) and enfranchisement. These groups, such as paroikoi, had gained personal influence without the corresponding institutional recognition, leading to status inconsistency (Kamen 2013; Davies 2017) that Mithridates' program sought to correct. The removal of Italians freed locals from foreign debt and likely facilitated the new deal.

Studying the Asian Vespers is crucial to understanding Mithridates' occupation as a whole, as this event shaped the experience of his rule throughout western Anatolia. The massacre's consequences, including the shift in political allegiances and social restructuring, were central to how local communities responded to Mithridates' policies. Therefore, an analysis of the Vespers sheds light on the broader dynamics of Mithridates' occupation and his efforts to reshape the socio-political fabric of the region.

By re-examining Mithridates' policies, this paper shifts the agency for the massacre away from lower-class rebellion to a broader spectrum of local society. The king's program aimed to forge new social alliances within western Anatolia's communities. The Vespers, rather than being a spontaneous uprising, may have been a crucial step in implementing Mithridates' vision of a new socio-political order.

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