

Botanical Royalty: The Kings In Their Gardens

Scholarship by kings and queens was an expected feature of Hellenistic monarchy, beginning with Ptolemy I and his account of the expedition of Alexander the Great. The rulers produced treatises in a variety of disciplines, but among the most prominent were botany and pharmacology. To some extent there was a certain pragmatism in such interests: poisoning was one of the easiest ways of removing a monarch, and for him or her to be knowledgeable about poisons and their origins was a matter of survival.

There is a long list of Hellenistic rulers who were pharmacologists, and, by association, interested in the flora of their environment. Attalos I of Pergamon wrote on forestry (Strabo 13.1.44). His descendant Attalos III was said to have spent so much time in his garden and writing on pharmacology and medicine that he neglected his kingdom. The Seleukid kings Antiochos III and VIII were also botanists, as was Nikomedes IV of Bithynia (Jacques 2008: 95-6; Keyser 2008: 581). But no one was as proficient in these disciplines as Mithridates VI the Great of Pontos (Totelin 2004: 1-19).

The king created a number of antidotes, generally based on herbs and other botanical materials. The most simple used walnuts, figs, and rue; others had dozens of ingredients. Eventually the name *mithridatios* (or *mithridatium*) was attached to one or more of these, a word (as "mithridate") still used today to mean a remedy against poison (Aulus Gellius 17.16). The Mithridatic antidotes became popular in Rome, especially among the Roman elite, although in time they evolved away from the originals.

Mithridates also experimented with scientific gardening, especially during his final years in the Kimmerian Bosphoros in 65-63 BC, attempting (unsuccessfully) to bring

Mediterranean plants into that northern region (Pliny, *Natural History* 16.137). His name became attached to a number of plants that he identified, including one that the herbalist Krateuas--a member of his court--named mithridatia, whose leaves were similar to an acanthus with rosy flowers. There was another called scordotis or scordion, about a cubit in height with downy leaves like those of the oak, which was indigenous to Pontos. Neither of these can be certainly identified today. There was a third, *eupatoria* (probably *Agrimonia eupatoria*); its seeds could relieve dysentery (Dioskourides 4.41; Pliny, *Natural History* 25.62-5, 127). Mithridates also developed some remedies for sore throats. He produced scholarly treatises on his research, many of which were discovered by his conquerer Pompey the Great at the collapse of the kingdom, including notebooks and other material in his own hand. He wrote in Greek, and some of his botanical and medical writings were translated into Latin by Pompeius Lenaeus, one of Pompey's freedmen and a medical authority in his own right (Pliny, *Natural History* 23.149).

Ironically, the reputation of the king as a master gardener had an impact on his two conquerers, Lucullus and Pompey. Even over a century later after the king's death, Lucullus' gardens on the Pincian Hill in Rome and near Naples were famed for their opulence and Eastern quality. He imported plants from Pontos, especially the cherry tree (Pliny, *Natural History* 15.102; Plutarch, *Lucullus* 39). Pompey dedicated his theater and portico in the Campus Martius in Rome a few years after his triumph over Mithridates, one of the most innovative architectural complexes of the era. It included an elaborate garden with trees from Asia, a visible remnant of Pompey's overseas career. The complex may also have had a statue of Mithridates brought from Pontos. The famous garden paintings from the villa of Livia at Prima Porta (just north of Rome), and now

visible in the Museo Nazionale Romano, are perhaps the best extant example of the type of garden that aristocratic Romans cultivated, and perhaps even those of Mithridates himself. The spirit of the king as gardener was visible in Rome long after his death.

Bibliography

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