

THE DATE OF THE OUTBREAK OF THE THIRD MITHRIDATIC WAR

B. C. MCGING

IN SPITE OF MUCH DISCUSSION ON THE SUBJECT, scholars have failed to come to any general agreement on whether the Third Mithridatic War started in the spring of 74 or of 73 B.C.¹ Some new observations on the matter can be made, leading to the negative conclusion that the spring of 74 is impossible. In question here is not only chronological accuracy, but also the course of events immediately before and during Mithridates Eupator's last war against Rome.

First, the arguments in favour of spring 74. Appian (*Mith.* 69–71) specifies that the war started in spring.² Other sources provide the evidence for 74. Eutropius (6.6) and the Epitomator of Livy (*Epit.* 93, 94) both state that L. Licinius Lucullus and M. Aurelius Cotta were fighting against Mithridates during their consulship in 74. Cicero (*Mur.* 33) and Plutarch (*Luc.* 6.5) also make it clear that the two consuls were at least sent to the east in 74, the year in which, according to Eutropius (6.6) and Appian (*BCiv.* 1.111), Nicomedes IV of Bithynia died and bequeathed his kingdom to Rome.

A passage from Phlegon (*FGrHist* 257 F 12.3) can also be used to support 74. In contrast to Appian (*Mith.* 79) and Plutarch (*Luc.* 15.1), who say that Lucullus left Amisus in the spring, Phlegon reports that in Olympiad 177.1 (summer 72 to summer 71) Lucullus left Murena in charge at Amisus and marched to Cabeira, where he wintered (ὅπου διεχείμαζε). Lucullus' troops are said to have complained that they had had to spend two successive winters in camp, the first at Cyzicus, the second at Amisus (Plut. *Luc.* 33.3). As, according to Phlegon, the winter of 72/71 was spent at Cabeira, this must be the third year of the war, which thus began in 74.

The dates of Mithridates' flight to Armenia and reception into Tigranes' presence sometime later also affect the chronology of the start of the war. Memnon (38.1) says that Mithridates spent twenty months in Armenia before Tigranes summoned him to his presence. Plutarch (*Luc.* 22.1) and

¹For bibliography, see B. Scardigli, "Sertorio: Problemi cronologici," *Athenaeum* 49 (1971) 225 notes 111–115; for more recent works A. M. Ward, "Caesar and the Pirates: The Elusive M. Iunius Iuncus and the Year 75/4," *AJAH* 2 (1977) 32–33.

²That Nicomedes IV of Bithynia had, according to Appian, died "lately" (ἄρτι) when the war started, provides little or no chronological help. If his death occurred any time in the year before the war, or even somewhat earlier, it would easily qualify as "lately." For Appian's flexible use of temporal adverbs see B. C. McGing, "Appian, Manius Aquillius and Phrygia," *GRBS* 21 (1980) 36–37.

Appian (*Mith.* 82) also note Tigranes' initial refusal to receive him, but Plutarch and Memnon imply that the reception came immediately after Tigranes' refusal to hand over Mithridates to Appius Claudius Pulcher in early 70 (Plut. *Luc.* 21.1; Memnon 31.2), while Appian (*Mith.* 85) dates the reception to the time of the first engagements between the forces of Tigranes and Lucullus a year later. If Plutarch and Memnon are right, Mithridates' flight from Cabeira seems to fall in 72, and the beginning of the war in 74. Appian's evidence favours 71 and 73.

Eutropius and the Epitomator of Livy, then, provide the only unequivocal evidence for fighting in 74. Although Cicero and Plutarch say that Lucullus and Cotta were sent to the east in 74, neither necessarily implies that the consuls were actually fighting in that year. The interpretation of the Phlegon passage given above is far from secure. Both a siege of Amisus in the winter of 73/72 and an advance to Cabeira in the spring of 72 cannot be included in Olympiad 177.1, and such a chronology involves the assumption that it took Lucullus a whole summer to get from Amisus to Cabeira along an unopposed route.³ It may also be asked, if Cabeira was the third winter, why it was that Lucullus' soldiers did not complain that they had had to spend three successive winters in camp. One must either assume with Magie that the winter, which, according to Phlegon, Lucullus spent before Cabeira, and, according to Appian and Plutarch, he spent before Amisus, was one and the same winter; or, perhaps better, accept Reinach's neat emendation of Phlegon's text, *ὅπου διεχείμαζε* [*Μιθριδάτης*].⁴

In balancing Plutarch and Memnon against Appian on the question of when Tigranes received Mithridates, a good case can be made for favouring Appian. Tigranes' refusal to see his father-in-law probably arose from a hope that he might be able to avoid committing himself fully against Rome. When Appius Claudius was sent by Lucullus to demand the surrender of Mithridates, it was almost inconceivable that Tigranes would comply—he could not give up his own father-in-law, or provide such shameful proof of his subservience to Rome—but he may justifiably have thought that this refusal should not make war with Rome inevitable, in spite of Appius Claudius' threats. Mithridates was effectively beaten and humbled, and Tigranes was merely offering him shelter in Armenia: he was not supplying arms, troops, or money, or even receiving him into his presence. Would Lucullus be prepared to take on an entirely new and difficult war in Armenia, in pursuit of an already defeated enemy, who was getting a distinctly cool reception from Tigranes? It seems unlikely, then, that Tigranes received Mithridates just after Appius Claudius' mission. A year

³See D. Magie, *Roman Rule in Asia Minor* 2 (Princeton 1950) 1210 n. 24.

⁴Magie (above, n. 3) 1211 n. 24; T. Reinach, *Mithridates Eupator: König von Pontos* (Leipzig 1895) 334 n. 1.

later, when the truth was finally forced on him and he realized that war with Rome had actually started, there was no longer any sense in keeping Mithridates at arm's length, and his advice on how to fight the Romans might be helpful.⁵

Clear and positive evidence in favour of 73 is, unfortunately, also in short supply. A royal Bithynian coin numbered with the era year 224 has long been regarded as "a most interesting piece of evidence in this chronological dispute."⁶ G. Perl has demonstrated that the Bithynian era began in October 297, and that, therefore, the royal Bithynian coin with the era year 224 belongs after October 74.⁷ If Nicomedes IV was on the throne after October 74, Mithridates must have invaded the following spring. The coin, however, is probably of doubtful relevance. As Maurenbrecher suggested,⁸ it could have been Nicomedes' son who minted it. We are told by Sallust (*H.* 4.69.9 Maur.) that Nicomedes did have a son, and that certain people hurried from Bithynia to deny his claim to the throne when his father died (*H.* 2.71 Maur.).⁹ In this way, Nicomedes can be allowed to die early enough in 74 for the war to start in the spring of that year. Actually there is no need even to suggest that Nicomedes' son minted the coin. Throughout the years of the First Mithridatic War there was no interruption in the royal Bithynian coinage, and yet there was certainly no king ruling in the country: "the fact that Bithynian coins were minted at all during this period must be attributed to the activities of cities which were not controlled by Mithridates and which remained loyal to Nicomedes."¹⁰ There is no reason why a similar situation should not have prevailed in 74: a

⁵Two other highly speculative arguments have been used to support 74. First, according to Orosius (6.3.1), Catiline was accused, and acquitted, of incest with the vestal Fabia in the same year that Cyzicus was relieved by Lucullus. If Cicero was intending to include Fabia among those vestals, who, he says, were acquitted ten years before his consulship (*Cic. Cat.* 3.9), then Cyzicus must have been relieved in 73, which puts the beginning of the Third Mithridatic War in 74. It is simply impossible, however, to say whether Fabia was one of those acquitted in 73. Second, Ward (above, n. 1) 33 concludes that the beginning of the war must coincide with Antonius' command against the pirates in 74. If there was a connection between the two—and it is by no means necessary that there was—one could argue just as strongly that Antonius' expedition was meant to prepare the way for a war against Mithridates which the Senate foresaw but which did not break out until 73.

⁶W.H. Bennett, "The Death of Sertorius and the Coin," *Historia* 10 (1961) 460.

⁷"Zur Chronologie der Königreiche Bithynia, Pontos und Bosphoros," in J. Harmatta (ed.), *Studien zur Geschichte und Philosophie des Altertums* (Amsterdam 1968) 299–330.

⁸*C. Sallusti Crispi Historiarum Reliquiae* Fasc. 2 (Stuttgart 1898) 228.

⁹The assignment of this latter fragment to the second book of Sallust's *Histories* gives some support to those who want to put Nicomedes' death in late 75: for bibliography, see Scardigli (above, n. 1) 253 n.111. The assignment, however, depends on a reference in Priscian, which Perl (above, n. 7) 312–317 argues should be changed from II to III. This seems a more satisfactory solution than believing that Eutropius, usually so reliable with consular datings, got the date of Nicomedes' death wrong.

¹⁰P. Pollak, "A Bithynian Hoard of the 1st Century B.C.," *ANSMusN* 16 (1970) 52.

city holds out against Mithridates and needs money, and, therefore, mints the same coins that have been produced for the previous seventy-five years. However one explains the coin, it is hardly firm evidence that the war started in 73.

A passage in Cicero's *Academica* (2.1) has been taken to favour 73. Cicero appears to be saying that Lucullus was sent to the Mithridatic War after his consulship.¹¹ In the context, however, *post* need not mean anything more specific than "next" or "later on." Cicero is marking out in a general way the different stages of Lucullus's career, with a different adverb for each new stage (*deinde*, *continuo*, *post*, *inde*, *post*), rather than making a precise chronological statement.¹²

Velleius Paterculus (2.33.1) points more definitely to 73: *cum esset in fine bellum piraticum et L. Lucullus qui ante septem annos ex consulatu sortitus Asiam Mithridati oppositus erat* Lucullus, after his consulship, opposing Mithridates seven years before the *Lex Manilia* of 66, does seem to indicate that Velleius thought the war started in 73.¹³

The vital evidence for 73 is twofold. First, there is too short a time for all that would have to take place between the beginning of 74 and the Pontic invasion a few months later in the spring. Plutarch (*Luc.* 7–8) and Memnon (27) make it quite clear that Cotta and Lucullus were both in Asia Minor when Mithridates attacked Bithynia moving with great speed.¹⁴ Before that invasion, Lucius Octavius has to go to Cilicia and die there, and report of this has to come back to Rome before Lucullus can be appointed governor; Lucullus has then to make his way to Asia.¹⁵ Nicomedes has to die and news of his death has to be brought to Rome, and the

¹¹*deinde* . . . *aedilis, continuo praetor* . . . *post in Africam, inde ad consulatum quem ita gessit ut diligentiam admirarentur omnes, ingenium agnoscerent. post ad Mithridaticum bellum missus*

¹²T. Rice Holmes, *The Roman Republic and the Founder of the Empire* 1 (London 1923) 402, and T.R.S. Broughton, *The Magistrates of the Roman Republic* 2 (New York 1952) 106 argue that the word *post* refers to the admiration of everyone for Lucullus' diligence, and their recognition of his ability, rather than to this consulship as a whole.

¹³But there are problems: *ex consulatu* does not necessarily mean "after his consulship," and, as Broughton (above, n. 12) indicates, the inaccuracies of Velleius' statement throw some doubts on its reliability: Lucullus' province by sortition was Cisalpine Gaul not Asia, and he was appointed to the governorship of Cilicia before that of Asia. Broughton also tries to maintain that the pirate war was drawing to a close (*in fine*) in 67, and that seven years before this would place Lucullus' command in 74. Velleius, however, is clearly talking about seven years from the time of the Manilian Law.

¹⁴Broughton (above, n. 12) 107 has Lucullus arriving in Phrygia by early autumn, but this goes against Plutarch and Memnon.

¹⁵Lucullus probably did not march across Greece on his way to Asia, which would have made it even more difficult for him to get there by the spring, *pace* Reinach (above, n. 4) 317 n. 1: see M. Gelzer, *RE* 13.1.380–381; J. Van Ooteghem, *Lucius Licinius Lucullus* (Namur 1959) 37–38.

claim of his alleged son to the throne has to be refuted through the agency of certain Bithynians coming to Rome and disowning him (Sall. *H.* 2.71 Maur.). The new province of Bithynia has to be organized after the initial appointment of M. Iunius Iuncus as governor. All this has to have taken place between the beginning of 74 and the spring, by which time, as we have seen, Cotta has already taken over Bithynia from Iunius Iuncus, and Lucullus is also in Asia. Speed of travel to and from Asia Minor is not easy to compute reliably, but there are some pointers. Cicero on his way to Cilicia left Brundisium shortly after the fourth or fifth of June and arrived at Laodicea on the thirty-first of July.¹⁶ The fastest letter to reach Cicero took forty-six days from Rome to Cybistra (*Att.* 5.19), but, as he himself acknowledged, this was very fast. Balsdon established that consuls might leave for their province before their term of office was finished, but the examples he cites in the period 79–53 seem to have had fighting to do in their provinces.¹⁷ There appears to have been little to bring Octavius to Cilicia while he was still consul. P. Servilius Vatia Isauricus, proconsul of Cilicia immediately before Octavius, brought his Asiatic campaigns to a successful close in 75,¹⁸ and Sallust (*H.* 2.98 Maur.) does imply that Octavius and C. Cotta were still in Rome at the beginning of 74. If Octavius was in no particular hurry to get to Cilicia, it would seem more sensible to wait until the spring to leave Rome, but even if one assumes that he left in early January, got to Cilicia in late February, and died immediately so that news got back to Rome by about early April, how could Lucullus have got his legion to Asia, joined forces with the Roman troops already there, instilled discipline into them, and started marching to join Cotta before mid-June at the earliest?¹⁹

The second vital piece of evidence against the spring of 74, and thus for the spring of 73, is provided by Cicero. In a passage of the *Pro Cluentio*

¹⁶For detailed analysis of Cicero's journey to Cilicia, see L.W. Hunter, "Cicero's Journey to his Province of Cilicia in 51 B.C.," *JRS* 3 (1913) 73–97. It took Cicero thirty-four days of actual travelling to get from Actium to Laodicea. Horace (*Sat.* 1.5) made his famous journey from Rome to Brundisium in fifteen days of not particularly relaxed travelling: one cannot imagine Cicero going any faster. Rome to Laodicea, then, took about fifty-four days' travelling, allowing for the journey from Brundisium to Actium.

¹⁷J.P.V.D. Balsdon, "Consular Provinces under the Late Republic," *JRS* 29 (1939) 58–65.

¹⁸Livy *Epit.* 93; Strabo 12.6.2; Eutrop. 6.3; Oros. 5.23; Amm. Marc. 14.8.4.

¹⁹Even if it were possible to devise a way of getting the consuls to Asia by the spring, they would both have had to leave Rome almost immediately on entering office, which would surely be extraordinary. Only a few of their activities in Rome are known: for the *res urbanae* of 74 see G. Perl, "Das Kompositionsprinzip der Historiae des Sallust (zu *Hist. fr.* 2.42)," in *Actes de la XII^e Conférence Internationale d'Études Classiques Eirene* (Bucharest and Amsterdam 1975) 323.

(137), pointed out by Van Ooteghem,²⁰ he implies clearly that Lucullus was in Rome at a time when there were already *consules designati* for 73, in other words, July/August 74. If one accepts Appian's statement on a spring invasion, the spring of 74 is out of the question, and 73 the only possibility. One is forced to conclude that Eutropius and the Epitomator of Livy made a mistake.²¹ Lucullus and Cotta may have been sent to Asia Minor towards the end of 74, but only in preparation for the coming war.

Mithridates, then, made a treaty with Sertorius in the summer of 74,²² prepared for war during the rest of the summer and the whole winter, invaded Bithynia in the spring of 73, and was defeated at Cabeira and forced to flee to Armenia in early 71. One question that arises is whether there was anything particular about the situation that led Mithridates to precipitate war by allying himself to Sertorius. Glew has recently argued that the increase in tension between Mithridates and Rome at this time may have been due to the failing health of Nicomedes.²³ As the Senate had finally taken a closer interest in Cyrene, which had been bequeathed to Rome by Ptolemy Apion in 96, but virtually ignored since then, Mithridates may have been led to fear that the Romans were embarking on a new expansionist policy and were planning to fill the vacuum that Nicomedes' death would leave in Bithynia: fear caused Mithridates to look to Sertorius and prepare for war.²⁴ The suggestion that Nicomedes' health was failing is a good one, but fear was not necessarily the dominant motive for Mithridates' actions. Throughout his career, he appears as a man of great ambition and very adept at taking advantage of opportunities that offered. In the years before 74, the Romans certainly seem to have thought that he would fight again if he got the chance: according to Sallust (*H.* 1.77.8 Maur.), Philippus in 77 warned that Mithridates was waiting for an opportunity to declare war, and C. Cotta in 75 referred to the necessity of keeping an army in Asia and

²⁰Glew (above, n. 15) 60–61.

²¹Magie (above, n. 3) 1205 n. 5 drew attention to Mommsen's observation that *consul* was often used where *pro consul* was meant, so that when applied to Lucullus and Cotta the word *consul* may not be strictly accurate. See also Reinach (above, n. 4) 317 n. 1.

²²The treaty was made in the summer before the war started (App. *Mith.* 69–71), but there is no reference to it in Pompey's letter to the Senate sent from Spain at the end of 75 (Sall. *H.* 2.98). As D. Glew, "Between the Wars: Mithridates Eupator and Rome, 85–73 B.C.," *Chiron* 11 (1981) 127 emphasizes, it would surely have strengthened Pompey's case for reinforcements to refer to such an alliance. It would appear that Sertorius and Mithridates had not yet come to their arrangement, making it impossible for the war to start in the spring of 74. This is, of course, an insecure argument—the alliance may have been made in secret and not yet have reached Pompey's ears.

²³(above, n. 22) 128–129.

²⁴P. Greenhalgh, *Pompey: The Roman Alexander* (London 1980) 237–238 dates the treaty with Sertorius after Nicomedes' death. Mithridates would not, he feels, have approached Sertorius before Rome's annexation of Bithynia had caused a declaration of war.

Cilicia because of Mithridates' power (Sall. *H.* 2.47.7 Maur.).²⁵ In 76, 75, and 74, the issues of royal Pontic coins, so sparse for nearly a decade, became once again very large, just as they had been in the build-up to the first Mithridatic War:²⁶ it looks as if the king was thinking of war again, and waiting for an opportunity. Perhaps he thought that Nicomedes' impending death would provide that opportunity. Ambition and opportunism probably spurred Mithridates to action just as much as fear.

When Lucius Octavius died, Lucullus was determined to get the governorship of Cilicia, in the belief that he would be given command in the approaching war against Mithridates. The reason why war was now in the air, and the Senate prepared to change the consular provinces, is presumably that news of the pact between Sertorius and Mithridates had come to Rome. Presumably also this news had not reached Rome when Nicomedes died: at that time the Senate was content to appoint the praetorian Iunius Iuncus to govern the new province of Bithynia. Now Lucullus secured Cilicia, and Cotta persuaded the Senate to upgrade Bithynia to a consular province and send him to replace Iuncus.²⁷ When Lucullus reached Asia he found the Roman troops there in a poor state of discipline. He had knocked them into shape, and was marching to join Cotta in the spring of 73, when Mithridates invaded.

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²⁵Glew (above, n. 22) 125 is surely reading too much into the brief words of Philippus and Cotta to conclude that in 77 the Senate was alarmed at the immediate threat of war with Mithridates, while in 75 this alarm had given way to "a more moderate assessment of the situation in the east."

²⁶See M.J. Price, "Mithridates VI Eupator Dionysus and the Coinages of the Black Sea," *NC* 8 (1968) 4-5.

²⁷Bithynia, of course, cannot have been Cotta's allotted province: when the Senate was deciding in 75 the consular provinces for 74, Bithynia was still being ruled by Nicomedes. That Cotta must initially have had some other province is confirmed in Plutarch (*Luc.* 6): he has to beg the Senate to send him to Bithynia.