



THE POISON KING

THE LIFE AND LEGEND OF MITHRADATES

ROME'S DEADLIEST ENEMY

ADRIENNE MAYOR

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PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Que les Romains, pressés de l'un à l'autre bout,
Doutent où vous serez, et vous trouvent partout.



RACINE, *Mithridate*, 1673

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↔ DRAMATIS PERSONAE ↔

*Major figures in Mithradates' story
(other proper names are listed in the index)*

ADOBOGIONA: Noble Galatian woman, rescued from poison banquet to become one of Mithradates' concubines.

AQUILLIUS: Rogue Roman official whose avarice led him to invade Mithradates' kingdom, beginning the First Mithradatic War; his greed was punished with molten gold.

ARCATHIUS: Mithradates' son by Laodice, brilliant cavalry commander, led vast barbarian army to liberate Greece in the First Mithradatic War.

ARCHELAUS: Tough Greek commander, Mithradates' star general in the liberation of Greece. Negotiated peace with Sulla, later joined Lucullus.

ARIATHES VI: Weak boy-king of Cappadocia controlled by his wife, Mithradates' sister, Laodice the Elder; he lost his life when he asserted himself.

ARIATHES VII: Mithradates' nephew and puppet ruler of Cappadocia. His defiance of his uncle cost him his life.

ARIATHES VIII: Doomed young pawn, set up as new king of Cappadocia by Nicomedes III.

ARIATHES IX: Mithradates' bastard son, established as king of Cappadocia.

ARISTONICUS: Heroic young rebel of Pergamon, led Anatolian revolt of the Sun Citizens against Roman rule when Mithradates was a boy.

ATHENION: Greek philosopher sent by Athenians to request Mithradates' liberation of Greece from Rome; elected commander in Athens to resist Sulla's siege.

ATTALUS III: Last king of Pergamon, eccentric recluse devoted to studying pharmacology. His will bequeathing his kingdom to Rome was contested by his son Aristonicus.

BACCHIDES: One of Mithradates' most trusted eunuch-advisers, assigned to save the royal harem from a fate worse than death at Roman hands.

BERENICE: Young woman from Chios whom Mithradates took into his harem, instead of condemning her with the rest of her people to slavery.

- BITUITUS: Mithradates' faithful bodyguard, cavalry officer from Gaul; he remained with Mithradates until the very end.
- CALLISTRATUS: Mithradates' secretary in charge of the king's papers, which may have included the formula for the *Mithridatium*; murdered by greedy Roman soldiers.
- CASSIUS: Rogue Roman general who, along with Aquillius, Oppius, and Nicomedes IV, staged the disastrous, unauthorized invasion of Mithradates' kingdom.
- CHAEREMON: Wealthy citizen of Nysa who aided the Romans; Mithradates offered a reward for his head.
- CLEOPATRA THE ELDER: Mithradates' favorite daughter; at age sixteen she married Tigranes the Great and became queen of Armenia.
- CYRUS THE GREAT: Founder of the vast Persian Empire; like Mithradates he fled as a youth to avoid assassination; served as a model for young Mithradates.
- DAMOGORAS: Skilled Rhodian admiral allied with Rome, bested Mithradates in naval battle for Rhodes.
- DARIUS I: Great Achaemenid conqueror of Persia; bestowed Mithradates' ancestral lands.
- DARIUS III: Noble Persian emperor vanquished by Alexander the Great; Alexander's respect for Darius influenced Mithradates' vision of a new Greco-Persian golden age.
- DORYLAUS: Orphaned boy of aristocratic Pontic family, raised as brother to Mithradates in the royal palace; friend and loyal commander in the Mithradatic Wars.
- DRYPETINA: Devoted daughter of Mithradates; afflicted with double teeth.
- FIMBRIA: Brutal Roman officer, overthrew his superior, Flaccus, and led his unruly legionnaires to ravage Anatolia; their lust for plunder undermined Lucullus's authority.
- GORDIUS: Noble Cappadocian, Mithradates' friend, henchman, and special envoy.
- HERMAEUS: Zoroastrian Magus, accompanied Mithradates to Kabeira, during war with Lucullus.
- HYSICRATEA: Valiant Amazon horsewoman-warrior from Caucasia; served as Mithradates' groom; she became his companion in battle and last true love.
- KRATEAS OF PERGAMON: Influential Greek herbalist, father of botanical illustration; Mithradates' fellow experimenter with antidotes and poisons.

- LAODICE, QUEEN OF PONTUS: Mithradates' murderous mother, suspected of poisoning his father. Her attempts to do away with young Mithradates were later avenged.
- LAODICE THE ELDER: Mithradates' oldest sister, regent of Cappadocia; thwarted her brother by marrying his enemy, Nicomedes III of Bithynia.
- LAODICE THE YOUNGER: Mithradates' younger sister and his first wife; treacherous like her mother, Queen Laodice, she plotted against Mithradates.
- LUCULLUS: Dogged, capable Roman general, Sulla's protégé; lost control of his troops and failed to destroy Mithradates and Tigranes in the Third Mithradatic War.
- MACHARES: Mithradates' son by Laodice, viceroy of his father's Bosphoran Kingdom in the Crimea; went over to Lucullus and paid with his life.
- MARIUS: Great Roman populist leader, enemy of Sulla in Rome's Civil War; met Mithradates and vied for command of the First Mithradatic War.
- METRODORUS THE ROME-HATER: Philosopher-statesman, invented memory and rhetorical techniques; Mithradates' speech writer and envoy.
- METROPHANES: Mithradates' loyal Greek general throughout the Mithradatic Wars.
- MITHRADATES CHRESTUS (The Good): Younger brother of Mithradates, lapdog of Queen Laodice. He did not live long.
- MITHRADATES V EUERGETES: King of Pontus, Mithradates' father, philhellene of Persian ancestry; assassinated by poison when Mithradates was a boy.
- MONIME: Intelligent Macedonian beauty from Stratonicea; Mithradates found her irresistible and agreed to her demand for the title of queen.
- MURENA: Sulla's ambitious lieutenant; rashly began and lost the Second Mithradatic War.
- NEOPTOLEMUS: Mithradates' Greek commander in Scythian, Greek, and Anatolian campaigns.
- NICOMEDES III: Crafty king of Bithynia, allied briefly with Mithradates against Rome, then opposed Mithradates over Cappadocia.
- NICOMEDES IV: Weak king of Bithynia; compelled by Roman legate Aquillius to invade Mithradates' kingdom without provocation, thus beginning the Mithradatic Wars.

NYSSA, ROXANA, and STATIRA: Mithradates' wretched younger sisters, imprisoned in a tower for life, to prevent their marriage and rival offspring.

OPPIUS: Rogue Roman general who, with Aquillius, Cassius, and Nicomedes IV, staged the disastrous invasion of Mithradates' kingdom.

PAPIAS: Mithradates' personal physician, worked closely with the botanist Krateuas.

PELOPIDAS: Greek philosopher-orator-ambassador in Mithradates' entourage.

PHARNACES: Mithradates' son and heir by Laodice; led a revolt against his father in the Bosporan Kingdom; made a deal with Pompey; ultimately crushed by Julius Caesar.

POMPEY THE GREAT: Roman general seeking glory; defeated Spartacus and Sertorius; took over Lucullus's failed command in the final Mithradatic War and brought it to a close.

SELEUCUS: Syrian pirate admiral of Cilicia, trusted friend of Mithradates.

SERTORIUS: Rebel Roman governor of Spain, commanded insurgent army of native Spaniards and Marius's exiled Populares; allied with Mithradates against Rome.

SPARTACUS: Thracian gladiator, led massive slave insurrection in Italy; may have planned to ally with Mithradates, who was encouraged by his revolt and saddened by his death.

STRATONICE: Harpist in Mithradates' court; became his lover and lady of Kabeira.

SULLA: Ruthless Roman patrician commander dispatched to avenge Mithradates' massacre of Romans and to recover Greece; destroyed Athens and won the First Mithradatic War.

TIGRANES II THE GREAT: Proud, inflexible Armenian monarch, amassed a vast Middle Eastern empire; Mithradates' close friend, son-in-law, and trusted ally.

XERXES: Great Persian king, fought Greeks at Thermopylae and Salamis; admired by Mithradates.

XIPHARES: Mithradates' son with Stratonice; he was killed to punish his mother.

⇌ TIME LINE ⇌

Some years are approximate

486 BC	Death of Darius I of Persia
323 BC	Death of Alexander the Great
202 BC	Hannibal defeated by Rome
190 BC	Antiochus the Great defeated by Rome
146 BC	Roman conquest of Greece, Corinth destroyed
135 BC	Spectacular comet coincides with conception/birth of Mithradates
134 BC	Probable birth year of Mithradates
133 BC	Attalus III of Pergamon wills his kingdom to Rome
133–129 BC	Aristonicus leads Anatolian Sun Citizens in revolt against Roman rule
120 BC	Mithradates V Euergetes assassinated by poison, second comet appearance; Mithradates VI crowned king of Pontus
119/118 BC	Mithradates goes into hiding to escape murderous plots of his mother
115/114 BC	Mithradates returns to Pontus, hailed as king; marries his sister Laodice, brings northern Black Sea and Scythia into realm
112–106 BC	Jugurthine War, Rome defeats Jugurtha
108 BC	Mithradates' extended reconnaissance mission in Anatolia
107–94 BC	Mithradates adds Colchis, western Armenia to Black Sea Empire, intervenes in Paphlagonia, Cappadocia, Galatia
96/94 BC	Mithradates forms alliance with his son-in-law, Tigranes of Armenia
91–89 BC	Social War, Italians revolt against Rome
89–85 BC	First Mithradatic War
89 BC	Nicomedes VI attacks Pontus at Rome's instigation. Mithradates sweeps to victory, liberating Anatolia, hailed as savior. Makes Monime his queen, Pergamon center of new empire

88–30 BC	Civil Wars in Rome
88 BC	Mithradates orders massacre of 80,000 Romans and Italians in Anatolia, executes the Roman legate Aquillius, who began the war in 89 BC
87 BC	Halley's Comet appears
88–85 BC	Mithradates' armies liberate and occupy Greece, Mithradates fails to take Rhodes. Sulla arrives to avenge the massacre and recover Greece
85 BC	First Mithradatic War ends in Rome's favor, Peace of Dardanus
83/81 BC	Sulla's lieutenant Murena attacks Mithradates, starting Second Mithradatic War; Mithradates is victorious
75 BC	Mithradates and Sertorius ally to make joint war on Rome
75/74 BC	Rome's puppet Nicomedes IV dies, wills Bithynia to Rome, igniting Third Mithradatic War
73–71 BC	Spartacus's gladiator-slave revolt in Italy
73–63 BC	Third Mithradatic War
73–70 BC	Lucullus is sent to destroy Mithradates. Meteorite interrupts battle in Bithynia; Mithradates besieges Cyzicus but Lucullus is victorious; Kabeira falls. Mithradates flees to Tigranes' Armenia, rebuilds army
69–68 BC	Lucullus crosses Euphrates, wins major victory over Tigranes and Mithradates, who escape. Lucullus loses control of his mutinous army
67 BC	Mithradates marches on Pontus, recovers his kingdom in major battle; meanwhile Pompey clears pirates from Mediterranean
66 BC	Pompey arrives in Pontus to replace Lucullus, deals Mithradates crushing blow in surprise moonlight battle, but Mithradates escapes with fugitive army into Colchis
65/64 BC	Mithradates evades Pompey, escaping over Caucasus Mountains to his Bosporan Kingdom, plans to invade Italy by land
63 BC	Earthquake jolts Bosporus. Mithradates' son Pharnaces stages coup. Mithradates commits suicide. Pompey declares victory, ending Mithradatic Wars
47 BC	Pharnaces tries to recover father's lost kingdom, invades Pontus. Crushed in short, brutal battle by Julius Caesar, who boasts <i>Veni Vidi Vici</i>

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For Josiah, O Best Beloved, words are not enough—but a nomad's saying about friendship captures what I want to say: "Because he shared my burden when it threatened to slow my pace and kept by my side when we traveled lightly."

THE
POISON KING



❧ INTRODUCTION ❧

Long ago and far away, in a little kingdom by the sea, a dazzling comet in the East foretold the birth of a remarkable Prince who would dare to make war on the mightiest empire. As an infant in his cradle, he was marked for greatness by lightning. While he was still a boy, enemies in the castle poisoned his father, the King. His own mother, the Queen, tried to do away with the Prince. But he escaped and lived like Robin Hood in the wilderness for seven years. He grew strong and brave and learned the secrets of poisons and antidotes. The Prince returned to his kingdom and killed the wicked Queen. He became a beloved King, ruling over many nations. When the powerful Empire across the sea invaded his realm, people from many lands joined his grand war. The battles against the Empire lasted his whole lifetime. Many beautiful queens sat by his side, but the King found true love with a woman as valiant in battle as he. When the King died, his passing was echoed by a terrible earthquake. For thousands of years afterward, the Great King's legendary deeds were remembered and retold.

IT SOUNDS like a fairy tale.¹ But add the documented facts and it's history. In about 120 BC, Mithradates VI Eupator the Great, king of Pontus, inherited a small but wealthy kingdom on the Black Sea (northeastern Turkey). Mithradates (Mith-ra-DAY-tees) is a Persian name meaning "sent by Mithra," the ancient Iranian Sun god. Two variant spellings were used in antiquity—Greek inscriptions favored *Mithradates*; the Romans preferred *Mithridates*. As a descendant of Persian royalty and of Alexander the Great, Mithradates saw himself bridging East and West and as the defender of the East against Roman domination. A complex leader of superb intelligence and fierce ambition, Mithradates boldly challenged the late Roman Republic, first with a shocking massacre and then in a series of wars that lasted nearly forty years.²

Poisoning was a traditional political weapon. Mithradates' father was murdered with poison, and Mithradates foiled several poison plots against

himself. As a child, he dreamed of making himself immune to poisons. After hundreds of experiments, Mithradates unlocked the pharmacological paradox still studied today: poisons can be beneficial as well as lethal. Many believed that his special antidote was the reason for his celebrated vigor and longevity. After his death, Mithradates' trademarked elixir was imbibed by Roman emperors, Chinese mandarins, and European kings and queens, inspiring a flow of scientific treatises on the Poison King's mastery of toxicology. This is the first book to explain the inspiration and scientific principles underlying Mithradates' antidote.

Mithradates was an erudite patron of the arts and sciences. His military engineers built the first water-powered mill and technologically advanced siege engines. The cryptic Antikythera mechanism, the world's first computer, may have been one of Mithradates' prized possessions.

Recruiting vast, ethnically diverse armies from far-flung lands, Mithradates envisioned a powerful Black Sea Empire to rival Rome's might. He won magnificent victories and suffered devastating defeats in some of the most spectacular battles in antiquity. Luring the Romans deeper into hostile lands, Mithradates forced them to conquer and occupy the rich territory that they had intended only to plunder. Rome's best generals won battle after battle but were never able to lay their hands on the last "untamed" monarch to defy the Roman juggernaut. His followers revered him as the long-awaited savior of the East. The Romans called him the Eastern Hannibal.

Mithradates became a legend in his own time. After the long Mithradatic Wars, even the Romans developed a grudging admiration for their most relentless enemy. Mithradates enjoyed a colorful afterlife in art, music, and literature (see appendix 2). Medieval artists illustrated harrowing scenes from his reign, portraying him as a noble "Dark Knight" battling cruel Roman tyrants. Machiavelli praised him as a valiant hero; his reign fascinated Louis XIV. Immortalized in a tragedy by the great French playwright Racine, Mithradates and his doomed harem also inspired the fourteen-year-old Mozart to write his first opera. Poets celebrated the King of Poison: "I tell the tale that I heard told. Mithridates, he died old."³ But even the details about Mithradates' last hours, death, and burial are shrouded in mystery.

For two millennia, Mithradates' extraordinary military and scientific achievements made him a household name, a major figure in the Roman Republic's all-star cast of characters, alongside Hannibal, Spartacus, Cleopatra, and Julius Caesar. Over the past half century, however, Mithradates' name and deeds began to fade from popular memory. Of all the

nations that “came into mortal conflict with Rome,” mourned one writer, “none is more utterly forgotten than the kingdom of Pontus. Her landmarks are uprooted, her temples fallen, and of her mightiest ruler there remain but distorted legends.”⁴

But there are signs that Mithradates’ star is rising again, as historians and archaeologists reconsider ancient struggles against imperialism, and as scientists revive the old dream of a universal antidote to toxic weapons. New crises ignite in many of the strategic lands where Mithradates once ruled, fought, and won allies, a list familiar from today’s headlines: Greece, Turkey, Armenia, Ukraine, Russia, Crimea, Georgia, Chechnya, Azerbaijan, Syria, Kurdistan, Iran, Iraq. While researching Mithradates’ astonishing feat of crossing the Caucasus Mountains to make his last stand in the Crimea, I pored over maps of this little-known yet historically important corner of the world. In August 2008, the Caucasus burst onto the world stage, as the Russian army attacked Georgia (ancient Colchis)—an independent former Soviet republic—over the contested regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Invaders and refugees streamed over the very same rugged mountain pass traveled by Mithradates’ fugitive army two thousand years ago.

Mithradates’ name may be unfamiliar in the West today, but his reputation as a defender against imperialism was not forgotten in the East. “Everyone knows the history of the struggle between Rome and Mithridates,” declared the great Russian historian Mikhail Rostovtzeff, and “everyone remembers that Mithradates made his last stand” in south Russia. In some former republics of the Soviet Union, Mithradates is still a local icon. For example, a Georgian biography of Mit’ridat appeared in 1965, and Russian novels about Tsar Mitridate Yevpatorus came out in 1993 and 2004. Between wars, sporadic scholarly and archaeological research takes place in Mithradates’ Black Sea Empire. Considering the recent spate of political poisonings in Ukraine and Russia, there is black humor in the name of a bar in the king’s old city of Pantikapaion (modern Kerch), daring you to order a drink in Mithradates’ Place.⁵

In lands once allied with or ruled by Mithradates, he is recalled as a charismatic leader who resisted Western encroachment. In Armenia and Kurdistan, for example, many consider Mithradates (Mehrdad, Mirdad, Mhrtat) a national hero.⁶ After a long period of ignoring Mithradates, Turkey is beginning to take an interest in the first ruler to unite and defend the diverse peoples of Anatolia against foreign invaders. In 2007, historian Murat Arslan published his dissertation *Mithradates VI Eupator, Roma’nın Büyük Düşmanı* (“Rome’s Great Enemy”), on the “an-

cient Anatolian hero, little known and neglected until today.” Arslan likens Mithradates, in his defense of Anatolia against the Romans, to Alexander the Great saving Asia from the Persian Empire. The leading Turkish historian Sencer Sahin compares Mithradates to the Turkish national hero Atatürk, who successfully fought foreign invaders.⁷

ANCIENT SOURCES FOR MITHRADATES' LIFE

Nearly everything we know of Mithradates was written from his enemies' perspective, by the inheritors of Roman imperial culture who looked through a Roman lens eastward toward the expanding frontiers of the empire. The extant (and missing) ancient sources for Mithradates' life and times have been comprehensively evaluated by modern historians of the Roman world.⁸ Of the fifty or so ancient texts that contributed details of Mithradates' life, our chief sources are Justin's summary of a lost history by Pompeius Trogus; Appian's *Mithradatic Wars*; Cassius Dio's history of Rome; Strabo's *Geography*; Memnon's fragmentary history of Heraclea on the Black Sea; Cicero's speeches; and Plutarch's lives of the Roman generals (Sulla, Lucullus, Pompey) who fought the Mithradatic Wars. Important material also appears in Pliny's *Natural History*, fragments of Sallust and Livy, and Diodorus of Sicily, Ammianus Marcellinus, Galen, and other Latin and Greek authors.

These ancient writers were able to consult the works of many other historians and a host of records, archives, living memories, and oral folklore, all irretrievable. Because the surviving texts were written from the vantage point of the victorious Roman Empire, outright and subtle biases were inevitable. To tell Mithradates' story from his own perspective, one would need to stand on the shores of the Black Sea and look, not just west toward Rome and Greece, but outward in all directions from Mithradates' kingdom and the allied lands that resisted Rome, lands with their own vital cultures and empires. This book takes up the challenge of trying to write from outside a Roman point of reference, to evoke a time before the imposing edifice of the triumphant Roman Empire.

As is often pointed out, certain foes of the Romans ended up more famous than their conquerors. Rome's fascination with its dangerous enemies, and admiration for their courage and ideals, produced a wealth of biographical material. Some Roman writers (Cicero, Tacitus, and Diodorus) were sharply critical of Rome's harsh imperialism and avarice. At least three sources (Strabo, Plutarch, and Trogus) had personal links

to the Mithradatic Wars. They understood animosity toward the late Roman Republic and treated some aspects of Mithradates' life favorably. Regrettably, we cannot consult the lost accounts by Mithradates' contemporaries who were personally involved in the wars, such as Rutilius Rufus, Lucius Cornelius Sisenna, Lenaeus, Metrodorus, and Hypsicrates.⁹

Intriguing clues in ancient and medieval texts are now all that remain of a rich store of lively anecdotes that once circulated orally about Mithradates. Every scrap in the literary record is valuable—along with artistic, numismatic, epigraphical, and archaeological evidence, much of it only recently come to light. A surprising amount of material about Mithradates and his times can be pieced together, to form a flickering picture of his upbringing and education, influences and heroes, speeches and appeal to followers, military strategies, scientific experiments and leisure pursuits, love affairs, hopes and doubts, motivations, and his complex psychology—even the king's moods, jokes, and dreams were recorded.

HISTORICAL METHODS

The incomplete nature of the ancient record sometimes forces historians into the realm of guesswork. In such cases, the approach followed by the great detective Sherlock Holmes is appropriate. When compelled to rely on "guesswork," Holmes explained his method thus: We must "balance probabilities and choose the most likely. It is the scientific use of the imagination, but we have always some material basis on which to work."¹⁰

In piecing together a coherent historical narrative from "broken shards," to reconstruct missing elements that were taken for granted but not described in the ancient record, historians of antiquity draw on classical and modern knowledge to fill in background details of economy, cultural influences, climate, geography, topography, natural history, political alliances, and so on. Historical reconstruction is essential in retrieving a fully realized life of any ancient figure. In the endeavor to balance fidelity to history with fidelity to an individual from the past, however, character and motivations "cannot be completely and authentically represented or expressed in the domain of history" alone. To be faithful to Mithradates, the historical person we can never really know, one can apply "the scientific use of the imagination" to fill in the spaces between surviving accounts and contextual facts. This is especially apposite for Mithradates, a unique, atypical Hellenistic ruler.¹¹

In recent years, historians have also introduced counterfactual, "vir-

tual,” or “what if” thought experiments as tools for understanding the meaning and ramifications of historical events, imagining alternative outcomes and filling in gaps. These techniques are not a modern invention. As early as the fifth century BC, for example, the Greek historian Herodotus and the playwright Euripides recounted alternative versions of the story of Helen of Troy, in which Helen never went to Troy but spent the entire war in Egypt. The Roman historian Livy asked what would have happened had Alexander the Great lived to invade Italy (Livy argued that Rome would have defeated him).¹²

John Lewis Gaddis’s *Landscape of History* (2002) was influential in helping me map uncharted areas of Mithradates’ life while maintaining historical fidelity. Gaddis also explains how scenario building allows historians to use their imaginations to revisit and replay the past, by asking in a disciplined way what might have happened under specific conditions.¹³

To narrate (and in a few cases to dramatize) Mithradates’ story, I sometimes flesh out missing elements in the historical record, drawing on known facts, literary and archaeological evidence, comparable events, and probabilities. In these instances, I follow the widely accepted rules for disciplined alternative history, established in Niall Ferguson’s *Virtual History* (2000): the details must be probable or plausible for Mithradates’ time and place, and they must match contemporary experiences, derived from ancient literature, art, and history and/or archaeology. Phrases like “might have,” “could have,” and “perhaps” signal these passages, but I also clearly identify, in text or endnotes, all instances of my filling in gaps or dead ends, adding historically appropriate details, reconciling contradictory accounts, or proposing logical scenarios for how events could have unfolded. In proposing scenarios, I adhere to the known historical landmarks and “conditions of possibility” in the ancient sources. This approach differs significantly from historical fiction, in which novelists are free to contradict known facts and create new characters and conditions.¹⁴

MODERN VIEWS OF MITHRADATES AND HIS BLACK SEA EMPIRE

Despite his extraordinary achievements and role in the downfall of the Roman Republic, Mithradates has received remarkably little scholarly or popular attention. Théodore Reinach’s magisterial *Mithridate Eupator, roi du Pont*, in French (1890) and German (1895), remains a great au-

thority on Mithradates, despite its *Belle Epoch* outlook. Since Reinach, a great deal of new material—scientific studies, historical analyses, and archaeological evidence—has come to light to explain Mithradates' toxicological research, his rich afterlife, his Black Sea context, and his ambitions and accomplishments. *The Poison King* is the first full-scale biography of Mithradates, from birth to death and beyond, in well over a century.

The first work exclusively about Mithradates in English was a popular biography by the historical novelist Alfred Duggan: *He Died Old: Mithradates Eupator, King of Pontus* (1958). Duggan's references to "cringing Asiatics" and "red Indians" date the book drastically. A stereotyped image of Mithradates as a cruel, decadent "oriental sultan," an "Asiatic" enemy of culture and civilization, originated in the 1850s with the great Roman historian Theodor Mommsen. Lâtife Summerer's survey of Mithradates' reception in Europe draws attention to the racist assumptions of Mommsen, who compared Mithradates to Ottoman despots, and of Hermann Bengtson, writing a century later, who declared that the massacre of 88 BC "could only be conceived in the brain of an Asiatic barbarian." As Summerer notes, Reinach, who praised Mithradates' intellect, claimed that his portraits revealed the "broad nostrils, thick lips, and fleshy chin of a self-indulgent oriental sultan," in contrast to the perfect profiles of classical Greeks. Mommsen's stereotype persists in, for example, Colleen McCullough's novel *The Grass Crown* (1991).

Michael Curtis Ford's 2004 novel *The Last King*, told from the point of view of Mithradates' son, portrays the king as a brilliant Greek commander. Mithradates makes an appearance as "an ambitious despot" from the East, "power hungry and ruthless," in Tom Holland's *Rubicon* (2003), and a military history by Philip Matyszak depicts Mithradates as savage and vindictive, "almost a monster," but magnificent in defeat.¹⁵

European scholars after Reinach have focused on specific aspects of Mithradates' reign. Brian McGing analyzes his propaganda and diplomacy in *The Foreign Policy of Mithridates VI Eupator* (1986). The campaigns against Mithradates from the Roman perspective are covered in the *Cambridge Ancient History*, volume 9 (Crook et al. 1994). Luis Ballasteros Pastor's *Mitridates Eupator, rey del Ponto* (1996) assessed Mithradates' conflicts with Rome as an independent Hellenistic monarch, and Attilio Mastrocinque's *Studi sulle guerre Mitridatiche* (1999) considered how ancient biases influenced modern views of the king.

The lands around the Black Sea are beginning to attract scholarly attention in their own right. Stephen Mitchell's two-volume *Anatolia*

(1993–95) was the first comprehensive study devoted to ancient Asia Minor. The Black Sea Trade Project (1996) of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology used advanced archaeological techniques to explore ancient Sinope, the capital of Mithradates' kingdom. In 2006, archaeologist Gocha Tsetskhladze founded the interdisciplinary journal *Ancient West & East*. The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Institute of History sponsors scholarship about Eurasia, defined as stretching from the Yellow Sea to the Danube. Deniz Burcu Erciyas (2006) surveyed Mithradatid archaeology around the Black Sea; Susan Alcock's "archaeology of memory" is uncovering the impact of Roman imperialism in Armenia; and a study of the impact of the Mithradatic Wars on civilians, by Toni Naco del Hoyo and colleagues, appeared in 2009. The Danish Centre for Black Sea Studies (founded in 2002) hosted an international conference of leading Mithradates scholars in 2007: the superb collection of papers, *Mithridates VI and the Pontic Kingdom*, was also published in 2009.¹⁶

For many readers, Mithradates' story may bring to mind current events in the Middle East, Transcaucasia, and former Soviet republics around the Black Sea. As a classical folklorist and a historian of ancient science, I first became fascinated by Mithradates' life and legend while researching unconventional warfare and the use of poisons in antiquity.¹⁷ My initial research began in the shadow of the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001, on New York City and the Pentagon, masterminded by the charismatic Islamic leader Osama bin Laden, who eluded capture by disappearing into the mountains between Afghanistan and Pakistan. I began writing during the "war on terror" and invasion of Iraq in 2003, which President George W. Bush justified by a spurious *casus belli*, claiming that Saddam Hussein of Iraq not only possessed weapons of mass destruction but was protecting the terrorists responsible for 9/11. As of this writing, spring 2009, U.S. military forces have been unable to capture or kill Osama bin Laden and are still engaged in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Some parallels with Rome's decades-long failed mission to capture Mithradates have already been drawn by others.

Mithradates' blows against a Western superpower two thousand years ago have begun to recapture the attention of Western commentators and the supporters of Islamic insurgencies. As it has for two millennia, Mithradates' name continues to strike discordant notes. Italian journalists compared Osama bin Laden to Mithradates in 2003. In 2007, a classicist and conservative commentator, E. Christian Kopff, remarked that

“Rome suffered its own version of 9/11 in 88 BC,” when Mithradates “massacred 80,000 Roman and Italian businessmen and traders and their families.” Even though many Roman generals defeated Mithradates in battles, he “remained at large, a hero in the Near East,” posing a threat to Rome’s national interest as long as he lived.¹⁸

“The story of Rome and Mithridates is worth pondering today,” notes Robert W. Merry, an expert on international economics. “Imperial expansion always breeds the likes of Mithridates in the far-flung reaches of the imperial domain.” It was the decades of inconclusive wars in the Near East to crush Mithradates and his followers, remarked Merry, that ushered in the “internal chaos and violence” which would end the four-hundred-year-old Roman Republic.¹⁹

Islamicists and their sympathizers often cast their resistance to Western superpowers in terms of resistance to “Rumieh,” the Arabic name for ancient Rome. The former Indian ambassador to Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Jordan, K. Gajendra Singh, sees “echoes of Mithradates” in the Iraq War. He maintains that Western hegemony in the Middle East began when the Roman army first invaded Anatolia. Since then, says Singh, the West has “demonized Mithradates VI of Pontus for standing up to Rome.” In Singh’s view, the West exploits Mideast oil resources “with the connivance of client rulers” just as the Roman Empire “ruthlessly exploited and taxed their subjects in Asia.”²⁰

Striking parallels between current world crises and the Mithradatic Wars arose during the completion of this book. The resurgence of piracy on the high seas, as Somalian pirates captured international oil tankers and held them for ransom, recalls the powerful pirate fleets of the first century BC, allies of Mithradates. Piracy thrives when authority is disputed and superpowers are distracted. Rome, contending with civil uprisings and provincial revolts as well as with Mithradates’ challenges, was severely hindered by the pirates infesting the Black Sea and Mediterranean.

The global economic collapse of 2008/9 bears striking similarities to the financial catastrophe that Rome suffered when Mithradates invaded Rome’s Province of Asia and wiped out the Roman presence there in 88 BC. As the great statesman Cicero explained, when so many thousands of “investors lost large fortunes, there was a collapse of credit at Rome, because repayments were interrupted. It is impossible for many individuals in a single state to lose their property and fortunes without involving still greater numbers in their ruin.”²¹

MITHRADATES' SIDE OF THE STORY

Extreme, charismatic personalities have always attracted popular fascination. In explaining the magnetism of the “Bad Men of antiquity” (and modernity), Edward Champlin, biographer of two Roman emperors with notoriously negative press, Nero and Tiberius, cites a fundamental truth: those considered heroes are not always good human beings.²² Many revered historical figures perpetrated deplorable acts. And even ultimate failure need not tarnish heroic status; nobility in defeat can win glory.

Combining the history of science, military history, and biography, I tell a tale of genius, charisma, and idealism ultimately destroyed by a powerful empire that could tolerate no rival. Capable of savage acts as well as gallant compassion, Mithradates embodied paradox. He was a Persian monarch who idealized democratic Greece and despised the Romans as uncivilized barbarians. The typical view of classical antiquity pits the civilized West (Greece, Rome) against the barbarian East (Persia).²³ Mithradates' dream was to unite the great cultures of Greece and the East to resist the seemingly unstoppable tide of the Roman Empire. In this romantic goal—and against impossible odds—Mithradates carried forward Alexander's vision of a new, diverse Greco-Asian empire for more than half a century.

My goal is to render a three-dimensional, holistic portrait of Mithradates and his world, and to try to explain his complex legacy. An articulate and erudite philhellene, admirer of Alexander the Great, and proud heir of Cyrus and Darius of Persia, he was a courageous warrior, brilliant strategist, devious poisoner, daring gambler, scientific researcher, avid lover, unpredictable parent, connoisseur of art and theater, escape artist, sometime terrorist, and relentless nemesis of the Roman Empire. Mithradates' vital afterlife in art, music, literature, and science is an important part of the story. This is the first biography to take account of the popular lore that surrounded Mithradates from his birth to the present day. To illuminate his life and the legend, I've drawn on the widest possible range of sources, from antiquity to international modern scholarship, and from the most recent numismatic, archaeological, epigraphical, and pharmacological discoveries to medieval chronicles, Gothic folklore, European tragedies, operas, modern fiction, and poetry.

Like the paradoxical toxins and antidotes he sought to control, Mithradates was a double-edged sword: corrosive of the predatory Roman Re-

public and protector of Rome's intended prey. In the end, the Romans emerged victorious. Yet Mithradates proved to the world that the new Roman Empire was not invincible. He forced the Romans to conquer and occupy the Mideast, a perpetual trouble spot for them. His popular cause led Rome to rethink its imperial policies. The long pursuit of this formidable enemy coincided with the death of the old Roman ideals of honor and freedom. Mithradates helped define for the ancients the limits of violent resistance and prepared the way for new methods of grappling with tyranny in the transition from Republic to Empire, from BC to AD.

Mithradates' story is well worth our attention. Modern parallels may sharpen our interest. But as the curious reader delves deeper into the ancient narratives, one is swept away by the sheer audacity, the epic defiance, the chiaroscuro effect of treachery and revenge set against compassion and idealism, the noble dreams and dreadful nightmares, and the tantalizing unsolved mysteries. Mithradates' incredible saga is a rollicking good story.



Kill Them All, and Let the Gods

Sort Them Out

IN SPRING of 88 BC, in dozens of cities across Anatolia (Asia Minor, modern Turkey), sworn enemies of Rome joined a secret plot. On an appointed day in one month's time, they vowed to kill every Roman man, woman, and child in their territories.

The conspiracy was masterminded by King Mithradates the Great, who communicated secretly with numerous local leaders in Rome's new Province of Asia. ("Asia" at this time referred to lands from the eastern Aegean to India; Rome's Province of Asia encompassed western Turkey.) How Mithradates kept the plot secret remains one of the great intelligence mysteries of antiquity. The conspirators promised to round up and slay all the Romans and Italians living in their towns, including women and children and slaves of Italian descent. They agreed to confiscate the Romans' property and throw the bodies out to the dogs and crows. Anyone who tried to warn or protect Romans or bury their bodies was to be harshly punished. Slaves who spoke languages other than Latin would be spared, and those who joined in the killing of their masters would be rewarded. People who murdered Roman moneylenders would have their debts canceled. Bounties were offered to informers and killers of Romans in hiding.¹

The deadly plot worked perfectly. According to several ancient historians, at least 80,000—perhaps as many as 150,000—Roman and Italian residents of Anatolia and Aegean islands were massacred on that day. The figures are shocking—perhaps exaggerated—but not unrealistic. Exact population figures for the first century BC are not known. But great numbers of Italian merchants and new Roman citizens had swarmed to recently conquered lands as Rome expanded its empire in the late Republic. Details of the bloody attack were recorded by the Roman historian



FIG. 1.1. Mithradates the Great, silver tetradrachm, 86–85 BC. Bibliothèque National de France.

Appian, whose figures were based in part on the memoirs of Cornelius Sulla, the Roman general dispatched by the Senate to avenge the killings. Other details emerged from accounts of eyewitnesses and survivors, such as P. Rutilius Rufus, a Roman official who escaped and wrote a history of the attack and its aftermath. More facts came from enemy combatants and communiqués captured by Sulla in the war that erupted after the massacre. Ancient statistics often represent guesswork or exaggeration. Even if the lower death toll of 80,000 was inflated, as some scholars believe, and if we reduce the count of the dead by half, the slaughter of unsuspecting innocents was staggering. The extent of the massacre is not in doubt: modern historians agree with the ancient

sources that virtually all Roman and Italian residents of Provincia Asia were wiped out.²

The plan was meticulously synchronized, and it was carried out with ferocity. As the fateful day dawned, mobs tore down Roman statues and inscriptions that had been erected in their public squares. We have vivid accounts of what happened next from five of the numerous cities where Romans were slain.

Pergamon, a prosperous city in western Anatolia, was fabled to have been founded by Hercules' son. Like many Hellenistic cities populated by Greeks who intermarried with indigenous people, Pergamon after Alexander the Great's death (323 BC) had evolved a hybrid of democracy and Persian-influenced monarchy. The cultural center of Asia Minor, Pergamon boasted a vast library of 200,000 scrolls, a spectacular 10,000-seat theater, and a monumental Great Altar decorated with sculptures



MAP 1.1. Greece, the Aegean Islands, and western Anatolia.
Map by Michele Angel.

of the Olympian gods defeating the Giants. People came from all around the Mediterranean seeking cures at the famous Temple of Asclepius, god of medicine. The Romans had chosen Pergamon to be the capital of their new province. But by 88 BC, most of western Asia was allied with King Mithradates, who had taken over the royal palace in Pergamon for his own headquarters.³

When the violence began that day in Pergamon, thousands of terrified Roman families fled out of the city gates to the Temple of Asclepius. By ancient Greek custom, all temples were sacred, inviolable spaces, havens from war and violence, under the protection of the gods. Under the right of asylum (*asylia*), anyone—citizen, foreigner, slave, innocent or guilty—could find refuge inside a temple. Pursuers usually dared not commit the sacrilege of murder before the gods. But on this day, there was no mercy for the people crowding around the statues of the healing god. The Pergamenes burst into the sanctuary and shot down the trapped men, women, and children in cold blood, at close range with arrows.

Meanwhile, as night fell in *Adramyttion*, a shipbuilding port, the townspeople drove the Roman settlers down to the seashore. The desperate throng plunged into the dark water. The killers waded in after them, cutting down the men and women and drowning the children in the waves.

In *Ephesus*, a cosmopolitan city of nearly a quarter million, similar atrocities defiled the Temple of Artemis. The Ephesians took great pride in their temple, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. Amazons had worshipped here, and the fabulously rich King Croesus built the original temple. It was said that the goddess herself had magically lifted the colossal lintel stone over the entrance. The sanctuary was filled with priceless treasures dedicated to Artemis, protector of supplicants. Known as Diana to the Romans, Cybele or Anahit in the Near East, Artemis was honored by Greeks and barbarians alike. When Paul preached in Ephesus a century after the massacre, he acknowledged that Artemis was still “the goddess worshipped by all Asia.”⁴

The Temple of Artemis claimed the most ancient tradition of asylum. The Ephesians liked to tell how Alexander the Great had visited their temple and, in a grand gesture, extended its radius of protection. Two centuries later, King Mithradates himself had climbed onto the roof of the temple and declared that the new boundary of asylum would now reach as far as he could shoot an arrow (his arrow flew a *stade*, about two hundred yards).

Everyone in the Greek world understood that murder in a sacred place was taboo. In fact, the citizens of at least one community allied with



FIG. 1.2. Temple of Artemis, Ephesus, site of massacre of Romans, ordered by Mithradates in 88 BC. Andre Castaigne, 1897.

Mithradates, the island of Cos, spared the Roman families who huddled inside the temple on the day of the massacre. When townspeople began smashing statues in Ephesus, the Romans naturally fled to the great

Temple of Artemis. But the Ephesians violated the hallowed tradition of sanctuary. Charging through the temple's carved cypress doors, they chopped down the suppliants as they clung to statues of the goddess.⁵

Farther south, in the port of *Caunus*, the bloodbath continued. Famed for delicious figs, Caunus was also notorious for its unhealthy salt marshes. At the time of the massacre, Caunus's main exports were salt and slaves for the Romans. The town had long been the butt of jokes about the greenish skin of the malaria-ridden populace, whose summer fevers were attributed to their eating too many of the famous figs. The city's dismal reputation continued into the Byzantine era. "Those wretched Caunians!" railed an early Christian orator. "When did they ever produce a worthwhile citizen? All their misfortunes are due to their extreme folly and rascality."

In 167 BC, the Romans had "liberated" Caunus from the powerful island of Rhodes. Yet in 88 BC, the citizens of Caunus were especially savage. On the day of the attack, the resident Italians clustered around a Roman statue of Vesta, the goddess who protected families and guaranteed Rome's survival. The Caunians pursued them, grabbed the children and killed them in front of their parents, then slaughtered the screaming women. They cut down the men last, heaping their bodies atop their families.

Tralles, a wealthy trading town known for fields of colorful snapdragons and heliotrope, had long resisted Rome. In retaliation, the Roman Senate had taken away the city's privilege of minting coins. When the citizens received Mithradates' secret missive, they dithered, worried about bloodguilt. The assembly voted to hire someone else to do the dirty work, a thug named Theophilus from Paphlagonia, a region famed for fine horses but stereotyped as the home of truculent, superstitious rubes. On the appointed day, Theophilus and his gang rode into Tralles, wearing wicker helmets and high leather boots, armed with scimitars. They herded the Italians inside the Temple of Concord, built by the Romans themselves and dedicated to peace. Survivors were haunted by the image of the attackers slashing at the victims' hands, which were left clutching the sacred statues.⁶

Similar scenes took place in many other towns allied with Mithradates. We know, for example, that Romans were killed on the island of Chios, because Mithradates later accused the Chians of not sharing confiscated Roman property with him. At Nysa, east of Tralles, ancient inscriptions indicate that resident Italians were murdered in the Temple of Zeus.⁷

“Such was the awful fate that befell the Romans and Italians of Asia,” wrote the historian Appian, “men, women, and children, their freedmen and slaves of Italian origin.” Five hundred years later, the butchery was still an icon of horror. At the twilight of the Roman Empire, as Vandals and Goths swept across North Africa, Saint Augustine (b. AD 354 in what is now Algeria) described the terrible catastrophes that the Romans had suffered when they were still pagans. He recalled that “disastrous day when Mithradates, king of Asia, ordered that all Roman citizens residing anywhere in Asia—where great numbers were engaged in business—should be put to death.” “Imagine the miserable spectacle,” continued Augustine, “as each person was suddenly and treacherously murdered wherever he or she happened to be, in bed or at table, in the fields or in the streets, in markets or in temples! Think of the tears and groans of the dying.” Indeed, Augustine exclaimed, “we should even pity the executioners themselves, for just as the slain were pierced in body, the killers were wounded in spirit. What cruel necessity,” he asked, “compelled these ordinary people to suddenly change from bland neighbors into ruthless murderers?”⁸

Who were the killers? Historians had long assumed that the lowest “rabble” must have carried out the slaughter. But a close reading of the ancient sources now leads scholars to conclude that ordinary people of all classes, ethnic groups, and walks of life participated in the popular coalition to wipe out Romans. The killers were indigenous Anatolians, Greeks, and Jews reacting to Rome’s harsh rule and corrupt system of taxation, which threw individuals and entire cities into deep debt. In 88 BC, Mithradates’ opposition to Rome appealed to wealthy and poor alike. Even if the death toll was lower than the 80,000 to 150,000 reported in antiquity, the massacre’s message was stark. As Appian wrote in his account of the Mithradatic Wars, the atrocities made it very plain how deeply the Roman Republic was detested for its rapacious policies. Contemporary Romans acknowledged the reasons for the attack. In Asia, warned the great statesman Cicero, “the Roman name is held in loathing, and Roman tributes, tithes, and taxes are instruments of death.”⁹

The Italian settlers, with their households and slaves, “wove themselves into the fabric of these Anatolian cities, achieving economic power and political position.” By 88 BC, a large population of Roman merchants, moneylenders, tax collectors, slave traders, entrepreneurs, shopkeepers, and others lived among the Greco-Asians as neighbors. Many of the new settlers had acquired their land from native people bankrupted by Roman taxation. The Romans spoke Latin or Italian dialects among themselves

but bargained in Greek in the marketplace. They bet on the cockfights, prayed in the temples, and laughed and cried in the theater. Yet they did not blend in. Their clothing and customs were different. Everyone knew who the Romans were. As historian Susan Alcock points out: "They knew where they lived. And they displayed every sign of hating their guts."¹⁰

Slavery was salt in the wound. Although many Greeks kept slaves, the massive Roman demand for slave labor clashed with the inclusive melding of democratic traditions and indigenous monarchies of Anatolia. Slavery was forbidden by ancient Persian law and religion. The Romans preferred to enslave non-Italians, especially people from the Near East. There was a seemingly endless supply of prisoners of war from the empire's advancing frontiers, and pirates prowled the Black Sea and eastern Aegean seeking human booty to sell to the masters of the Mediterranean world. It was said that as many as ten thousand captive people from around the Black Sea and the Near East might be traded in one day at the great Roman slave market on the once-sacred island of Delos. Crushing taxes were another form of servitude, forcing even the wealthy into debt and compelling some families to sell their children into slavery. A typical elite Roman owned several hundred slaves; a craftsman two or three. According to the latest estimates, there were roughly 1.5 million slaves in Italy at this time. The ratio of slaves was higher in the Roman Province of Asia. In Pergamon, for example, slaves made up about one-third of the population.¹¹

Most of those held in bondage spoke non-Italian tongues, but even without the marker of language it was easy to recognize slaves. Many had Latin words crudely tattooed across their foreheads identifying them as Roman property. Slaves (and salt) were commodities subject to Roman duty taxes. According to a legal inscription of this period found in Ephesus, imported slaves were to be tattooed with the words "tax paid." (During the later Empire, "Stop me, I'm a runaway" was another motto that Roman masters etched on the brows of slaves.)¹²

A few years before the massacre, the Romans had punished the Ephesians for protecting a fugitive slave who had taken refuge in the Temple of Artemis. The Ephesians (who believed they were the descendants of one thousand runaway Greek slaves) had prevented a Roman official from entering the temple to retrieve his property, perhaps a local man enslaved for debt. In the inscribed records of cures that people sought at temples of Asclepius, archaeologists have found the names of slaves who prayed to the healing god to remove their forehead tattoos. Runaways often wore pirate-style bandanas to hide the marks of their bondage;

others attempted to remove the tattoos with caustic salves. After the massacre, about six thousand liberated slaves joined Mithradates' cause, swelling his army with highly motivated fighting men filled with hatred for Romans.¹³

As word of the attacks of 88 BC spread, mercenary soldiers commanded by Roman officers in the East deserted en masse. The Roman navy, manned by Greek sailors stationed in the Black Sea, went over to Mithradates, bringing hundreds of warships to his cause. And the complicity of each murderous city—the entire populace—was now sealed in blood. Mithradates' master plan ensured what scholars of international relations call “credible commitment.” In diplomatic stare-downs and in warfare, one side can reinforce its strategic position by deliberately cutting off its own options, thereby making its threats more believable. All Roman Asia was now credibly committed to war on Rome.

Back in Italy, the reaction was shock, outrage, fear. Mithradates' timing was unerring. Violent civil war was erupting in Italy; the Roman losses in Asia precipitated a massive financial crisis in Rome. A series of awful portents had terrified the city. Out of a clear blue sky, a celestial trumpet blared out a long, mournful note. Etruscan soothsayers (traditional interpreters of divine messages) declared that it heralded the end of an age and the advent of a new world order. Halley's Comet (as we now call it) appeared, another dreadful portent. The Senate declared Mithradates Rome's most dangerous enemy and dispatched the ruthless general Sulla on a search-and-destroy mission.¹⁴

The massacre of 88 BC was unique, even in that blood-soaked era. It did not occur in towns at war, nor was it a rampage by soldiers in the aftershock of battle. In no other episode in antiquity was ordinary people's killing of so many specifically targeted civilians so painstakingly planned in advance. No other ancient terror attack featured simultaneous strikes in so many cities.¹⁵ The indigenous revolt in Roman Britain led by the warrior queen Boudicca is sometimes compared to the massacre of 88 BC. Her uprising in AD 59 culminated in the slaughter of about seventy thousand Romans and British sympathizers, but those killings were spontaneous, not planned and methodical. (See box 1.1 to compare mass killings and deaths in natural disasters in antiquity and modern times.)¹⁶

Genocide is a charged concept, but it seems fair to cast the carnage of 88 BC as genocidal. Genocide, defined by the United Nations in 1948, specifies killing or maiming with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group. Mithradates' intent to exterminate Romans living in Anatolia was explicitly based on language and

BOX 1.1

COMPARISON OF ESTIMATED DEATH TOLLS OF SOME NATURAL DISASTERS
AND MASS KILLINGS, ANTIQUITY TO PRESENT

Plague at Athens, beginning of Peloponnesian War, 430–428 BC: about 75,000 dead

Boudicca's revolt in Roman Britain, AD 59: about 70,000 dead

Nazi Germany's genocide against European Jews, 1940–45: 6,000,000 dead

U.S. atom bombs dropped on Japan, 1945: 80,000 killed by initial blast at Hiroshima; 40,000 killed by initial blast in Nagasaki (death tolls doubled in ensuing months)

Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge death toll, Cambodia, 1976–79: 750,000 to 1.7 million dead

Saddam Hussein's attacks on Kurdish villages, northern Iraq, 1988: about 50,000 dead

Serbian slaughter of Muslims in Bosnia, July 1995: about 8,000 dead

Hutu massacre of Tutsi, Rwanda, 1994: 800,000 dead in 100 days, about 8,000 per day

Al Qaeda attack on World Trade Center, New York City, and Pentagon, Washington, DC, September 11, 2001: nearly 3,000 dead

Tsunami, Indian Ocean, December 2004: 174,000 dead

Earthquake, Pakistan and India, October 8, 2005: 73,000 dead

Cyclone Nargis and floods, Burma/Myanmar, May 2008: about 100,000 dead or missing

Earthquake and aftershocks, China, May–June 2008: more than 68,000 dead

ethnic origin. His goal was the elimination of an enemy by destroying the entire Italian-speaking population in Asia Minor.¹⁷

Was the massacre an act of terrorism, as we understand it today? Terrorism is another highly controversial concept, but most would agree that terrorism is a deplorable tactic, usually defined as the use of violence against innocents in order to inspire fear in the service of a political goal. In 88 BC, unsuspecting Roman noncombatants were systematically killed, and the perpetrators' intention was to convince Rome to alter its foreign policy and withdraw from Asia. Of course, the Romans also carried out acts of terrorism at home and abroad. As historian Gregory Bolich pointed out in a recent article on terrorism in antiquity, "When-

ever Romans indulged in state-sponsored terrorism, subjugated people responded in kind.” Those who resort to terrorism always believe that their ideals and objectives justify it, notes Bolich, and it is the victims who ultimately decide what qualifies as terrorism.¹⁸

But the official definition of terrorism is debated. It is often said that one nation’s terrorists may be another nation’s freedom fighters, and that “war is terror within bounds” whereas terrorism exceeds the horrors expected in warfare. Some maintain today that state-sponsored mass killings of civilians are not technically acts of terrorism. Even the United Nations has been unable to come up with a definition accepted by all members. According to the UN draft of 2005, “the targeting and deliberate killing of civilians and noncombatants cannot be justified or legitimized by any cause or grievance,” and any such action to “intimidate a population or to compel a government [to act] cannot be justified on any ground.” But, notably, the phrase that originally concluded this sentence—“and constitutes an act of terrorism”—was deleted in the final version.¹⁹

It is challenging to try to apply concepts drawn from modern international law to the past without being anachronistic, cautions R. Bruce Hitchner, historian of Rome and director of the Dayton Peace Accords Project. Hitchner points out that the Romans themselves and other peoples in antiquity regularly carried out activities in war and peace that clearly fall into the categories of genocide, terrorism, and crimes against humanity. Ancient societies as a whole were fundamentally violent, he notes, and the first century BC was fraught with private, collective, and state-sponsored acts of terror. “It’s high time we acknowledge the darker side of antiquity,” Hitchner’s conclusion: “The massacre of 88 BC certainly looks like terrorism, genocide, *and* a crime against humanity.”²⁰

In terms of scale and cold-blooded premeditation, the black day in 88 BC was the most horrendous and most successful single act of terror in ancient history (more details of this event are given in chapter 8). Yet most modern Roman historians tend to gloss over this “disquieting episode.” This tendency reflects a kind of “scholarly amnesia,” in Susan Alcock’s words—an attempt to smooth over the violence of Rome’s annexation of the East by focusing instead on the peaceful “high culture” and consensus that emerged in the later Empire. But instead of conveniently forgetting the massacre of 88 BC, suggests Alcock, historians should probe the complex “back story” to understand the cultural collisions that helped to create Mithradates’ world.²¹

It is disappointing that historians have not given this “extraordinary event in antiquity” the discussion it deserves, agrees Deniz Burcu Erciyas,

a young Turkish historian. “Until today,” notes Erciyas, “very few events have surpassed this level of genocide.” Certainly, in our own era, when mass killings and terrorism have become all too familiar, it seems worth paying attention to a historic attack of such scale and savagery in the ancient Near East, a moment in which aggrieved, diverse populations came together to strike a vicious blow against the dominant imperial power.²²

After the massacre, Mithradates’ armies marched into Greece, freeing the mainland Greeks from Roman domination. Hailed as a liberator whose birth had been foretold by ancient oracles, the brilliant strategist became the most powerful ruler in western Asia, annexing territories and winning the loyalty of zealous followers from the Black Sea to ancient Iraq. Thus the Romans—wracked by bloody civil conflict and slave uprisings in Italy—were drawn into a long war in the Mideast, costing countless lives, draining treasuries, and gnawing at Rome’s image of invincibility.

Rome’s best generals, from Sulla and Lucullus to Pompey the Great, would attempt to destroy Mithradates, but he eluded capture. Each time the Romans had him in their grasp, he slipped away to plan new attacks with his seemingly inexhaustible armies. The most dangerous threat to Rome since Hannibal, Mithradates won stunning victories in some of the most spectacular battles in antiquity.²³ Yet he also suffered staggering defeats that reduced his army to a few ragtag survivors. The charismatic ruler’s uncanny ability to surge back stronger after each setback unnerved the Romans. Mithradates’ tactics were often underhanded, diabolical, devastating. Yet he also pursued some noble ideals: Mithradates freed thousands of slaves, pardoned prisoners of war, granted wide democratic voting rights, and shared his royal treasure with his followers. Contradictions like these helped to create the king’s legendary aura.

Mithradates’ dual image as a tragic hero confronting the juggernaut of empire and as an icon of cruelty persisted throughout the Middle Ages into modern times in Europe and the Middle East. Even though Mithradates’ Greco-Persian heritage and appeal combined Eastern and Western traditions, his lifelong conflict with Rome seemed to epitomize for many a collision of East and West. For the Romans, Mithradates’ Greekness made him culturally superior, but his Persian-Anatolian heritage made him an inferior barbarian. Cicero, who lived through the Mithradatic Wars, demonstrates the Roman ambivalence toward the man who perpetrated “the miserable and inhuman massacre of all the Roman citizens, in so many cities, at one and the same moment,” with the intention of erasing “all memory of the Roman name and every trace of its empire.” They called this Mithradates a god, continued Cicero; they called