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
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

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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.

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.”

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
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 Caunos, the bloodbath continued. Famed for delicious figs, Caunos was also notorious for its unhealthy salt marshes. At the time of the massacre, Caunos’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” Caunos from the powerful island of Rhodes. Yet in 88 BC, the citizens of Caunos 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?”

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.”

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.”

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.

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.)

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

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-

### 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 ensuring 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
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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.”\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.

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. 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
Map 1.2. (Top) the extent of the Roman Republic’s rule, in about 100 BC. (Bottom) Mithradates’ ideal “Black Sea Empire.” The shading indicates the furthest extent of Mithradates’ fluctuating power and influence during the Mithradatic Wars, including his kingdoms, his conquests, and his core allies—lands from which he could recruit armies. Maps by Michele Angel.
him their Good Father and the Savior of Asia; they called him Liberator. Yet after Mithradates’ death, Cicero himself called Mithradates the “greatest monarch since Alexander” and the most formidable opponent Rome had ever encountered. For generations after his passing, Mithradates could not be spoken of without “anxiety mixed with admiration,” as the Roman writer Velleius Paterculus commented in AD 30. Mithradates, he declared, possessed exceptional bravery and a great spirit, but in his hatred for Rome, he was another Hannibal.  

Mithradates remains an ambiguous figure for many today: hero and model to some, perpetrator of monstrous crimes against humanity according to others. How did this one individual mobilize such virulent animosity against the mighty empire? Who was this man—and why did he harbor such murderous hatred toward Rome?