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Common Cause Versus Rome: The Alliance Between Mithradates VI of Pontus and Tigranes II of Armenia, 94-66 BCE

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Armenia, the rich mountain kingdom of eastern Anatolia, was isolated from neighboring lands, in part by its insular character and in part by its geography of high plateaus and mountain ranges (400 to over 4,000 meters, 1,300 to 13,000 feet). Rugged terrain and mountain passes guarded entry points from each direction. Around 190 BCE, the founding king Artaxias of Armenia began to acquire land from the Medes, Iberians, and Syrians and had confrontations with Pontus and Cappadocia, followed by the treaty of 181 BCE that favored Anatolian kings over Pharnaces of Pontus, Mithradates VI Eupator's grandfather, who had asserted control over Cappadocia. Beginning in 120 BCE, Parthia controlled Armenia as a vassal country.

Friendly relations between Pontus and Armenia were first established during the overlapping reigns of Mithradates VI Eupator of Pontus (born ca 134, died 63 BCE) and Tigranes II of Armenia (ca 140-55 BCE). Like Armenia, Pontus had once been a satrapy of the Persian Empire. In about 119 BCE, Mithradates VI Eupator inherited a kingdom with very strong Persian cultural and religious traditions, especially in the interior, although the new Pontic capital of Sinope and other ports on the Black Sea coast were distinguished by a patina of Greek influence. Both Pontus and Armenia had been included in

Alexander's (non-military) conquests of the fourth century BCE, but after Alexander's death and the wars of his successors, Armenia never took on marked Hellenistic features, while Mithradates exploited his Macedonian-Greek heritage as well as his Persian background. Mithradatid foreign policies traditionally looked westward, toward Bithynia, Paphlagonia, Cappadocia, and the Aegean coast, and toward Greece and Rome. In contrast, landlocked, inaccessible Armenia remained within the cultural traditions of indigenous Armenians, Medes, Persians, Achaemenids, Seleucids, and Parthians, with little interest in or knowledge of power struggles in the Mediterranean, Black Sea, and western Anatolia. Armenia did fight on the side of Antiochus III against Rome, but its rulers changed course just before Antiochus's defeat in 190 BCE, and asserted independence. Some little-understood epigraphical evidence (rock-cut inscriptions) from this era suggests that Greek learning had reached Armenia, but Armenia could not be described as participating in Hellenistic culture, until the reign (ca 95-56 BCE) of Tigranes II, described by some ancient sources as a philhellene.

Early in his reign, Mithradates received the fiefdom of western Armenia Minor from its ruler Antipater, and so his lands bordered the rugged frontier of Armenia. Mithradates probably knew more about Armenia than Tigranes knew about Pontus. As a descendent of Alexander's Macedonian aristocracy, educated by Greek tutors, young Mithradates would have learned ancient Greek myths about Armenia, supposedly named after one of Jason's Argonauts, Armenus of Thessaly. In the Homeric legends of the Trojan War, the peoples of Anatolia and Armenia were described as the allies of the Trojan King Priam and Armenians helped to defend Troy against the Greeks. Moreover, Mithradates, an expert horseman, certainly admired Armenia's famous, magnificent steeds much sought after in antiquity and had been demanded as tribute as early as the Assyrian Empire. Mithradates—with his eclectic Greco-Persian education and self-image as the champion of the venerable ancient civilizations of Persia and Greece, and thanks to his intelligence sources—made an effort to keep up with recent politics and current events in Armenia. It seems safe to say that Tigranes, who spent the first half of his life as a vassal "guest" in the Parthian court, was less well-informed about Mithradates Eupator's disputes with Rome.

As a descendant of Persian royalty, Mithradates, like Tigranes, inherited ancient Iranian religious responsibilities in the fire worship

of Ahura Mazda and Mithra. Both kings served as the chief Magus of the Zoroastrian Magi, carrying out traditional fire ceremonies on mountaintops. Mithradates also shared important Persian cultural values with Tigranes—riding, shooting, hunting, loyalty, honesty, autonomy—and both men maintained large harems. Armenian rulers had given refuge to Hannibal after the Carthaginian's loss of the second Punic War to the Romans in 202 BCE. Hannibal had reportedly designed Armenia's heavily fortified royal capital, Artaxata.

After Mithradates' struggles with Rome over control of Cappadocia had escalated into armed standoffs, censure from the Roman Senate, and threats from Sulla in about 95 BCE, Mithradates decided to elude Roman scrutiny and avoid further acrimonious confrontations with Rome, for the time being. Seeking a strong, dependable alliance in the Black Sea region, Mithradates turned his attention east, to Armenia, far removed from Rome's notice. Even though the two kingdoms had not had diplomatic relations previously, Armenia was a natural ally, especially now. Mithradates' calculated move to forge an alliance with Tigranes was well timed.

As a boy of 16, Tigranes had been delivered by his father to the Parthian court to be raised in the imperial city of Ctesiphon on the Tigris (now central Iraq). There Tigranes was educated in Parthian culture, which combined nomadic and ancient Iranian (Persian) traditions. Notably, Tigranes' mother was a princess of the Alans, nomadic people north of the Caucasus Mountains (modern Alania-North Ossetia). Like the practice of sealing alliances through marriage, the practice of sending a young prince to grow up in another court was a way to ensure "friendly" relations between allies that were not necessarily trusted friends.

Early in his reign (which began in about 119 BCE), Mithradates counted at least two officials from the Arsacid Kingdom of Parthia in his circle of friends. In about 96/95 BCE, Mithradates' Parthian associates and his extensive foreign intelligence networks informed him that Tigranes II, now in his mid 40s, had been permitted to return Armenia as king, in exchange for ceding control of "seventy valleys" to Parthia and with the expectation that Tigranes would abide by their directives as a vassal king. But as Tigranes was well aware, and as Mithradates also knew, since about 130 BCE, Parthia's attention was focused on their eastern frontier, fighting off aggressive incursions by Saka-Scythians, Tochari, and other bellicose nomadic groups. In 128 BCE, for example,

the Parthian king Phraates II had marched out to meet these tribes: he was defeated and killed. Tigranes harbored his own grandiose mission, to amass a powerful Armenian empire. After a few years, he would begin to consolidate his holdings and expand into Media, Assyria, Atropatene, Sophene, Gordyene, at the expense of Parthia.

Despite his relative ignorance of events in the West, Tigranes possessed sharp intelligence and grand ambitions. It is unclear how cognizant Tigranes was of Mithradates and his conflicts with Rome before they became formal allies. As a Persian-oriented monarch and Zoroastrian priest, Tigranes surely knew of the ancient Iranian oracles about a long-awaited savior-king. Tigranes—along with the Parthian court and the Magi—would have observed the spectacular comets of 135 and 119 BC. It would have reached their ears that the Magi in the Pontic court had interpreted these comets as omens that Mithradates VI was the great leader who would liberate the Eastern lands from tyranny. They also may have heard that after his conquests in the northern Black Sea region early in his reign, his new allies and subjects had honored him as Shahanshah, “King of Kings.” This was the traditional title for the single most powerful ruler in Persian-influenced lands—a title already assumed by the Parthian king and coveted by Tigranes.

From Tigranes’ perspective, an alliance with this fast-rising leader of the Black Sea Empire would be valuable, as long as the two monarchs agreed to respect each other’s separate spheres of influence. While Tigranes himself was apparently oblivious to Roman predations in Anatolia, his sovereigns in Parthia may have been more knowledgeable and more calculating. Recently, Maret Jan Olbrycht has suggested that Parthians may have set Tigranes on the Armenian throne “in a well-thought-out move” meant to help Mithradates’ resist Rome. Well aware of “Roman dominance in Anatolia and the Roman appetite for conquest,” they may even have communicated their intentions to Mithradates, argues Olbrycht. Perhaps it was no coincidence that Mithradates began his new aggressive policies in Cappadocia upon Tigranes’ arrival in Artaxata and then sought an alliance with Armenia.¹

In about 94 BCE, Mithradates sent his close confidante, the Cappadocian aristocrat Gordius, as his envoy to Tigranes. Gordius described in detail Mithradates’ conflicts with Rome over the past few years. Gordius also told of the Romans’ interference and predations in Anatolia, emphasizing their imperial designs, dependence on

slavery, lust for plunder, imposition of harsh taxation policies, and their intolerance of independent monarchs in Asia Minor. Gordius explained that Mithradates and Tigranes were targeted as autonomous rulers to be destroyed and replaced with weak kings controlled by the Roman Senate. For examples, Gordius could point to the client kings of Bithynia, Paphlagonia, and Cappadocia who did the bidding of their Roman masters.

After briefing Tigranes on the situation in western Anatolia, Gordius presented Mithradates' proposition. Mithradates suggested that Tigranes should send his army to attack Cappadocia across the Armenian border and remove the Roman puppet ruler Ariobarzanes. In exchange, Mithradates Eupator offered Tigranes marriage to his beloved daughter, Princess Cleopatra. At this time, King Tigranes enjoyed a harem and concubines, but apparently had not yet chosen a queen. Notably, the ancient historians agree that Mithradates Eupator was strongly attached to all of his daughters, and that the daughters returned his love. Gordius may have made this family attachment clear and he could point out to Tigranes that Mithradates' genuine paternal affection would make his daughters all the more valuable in marriage alliances. Indeed, Cleopatra became Tigranes' lifelong queen and valued companion and advisor, which must have influenced his loyalty to Mithradates even after his serious losses in beginning of the Third Mithradatic War.

Tigranes agreed to the alliance and marriage, without recognizing the consequences. Having lived the past 30 years in Parthia, Tigranes did not foresee that the Romans would react so strongly to regime change in Cappadocia². Tigranes was a few years older than his new father-in-law, Mithradates. They became good friends and strong allies, treating each other as equals. Both rulers were intelligent, strong-willed, energetic, and ambitious. They enjoyed riding and hunting together, staying at Tigranes' hunting lodges in his forest and mountain estates. They probably conversed in Greek, the language used in Hellenistic courts, although Mithradates also knew Parthian and Armenian. Following his usual practice with other allies and friends, Mithradates would have presented Tigranes with a carved agate ring bearing Mithradates' portrait. It is likely that Mithradates also shared his special "universal antidote" with Tigranes, a celebrated concoction of more than 50 poisons and antidotes in tiny doses, intended to strengthen

one's immune system and neutralize all poisons. Notably, both men did experience robust health and remarkably long lives.

Apart from agreeing to aid Mithradates in his challenge to Roman rule in Anatolia, Tigranes had his own agenda. The older monarch did not see himself as doing Mithradates' bidding, but he viewed their mutual support as furthering his own goals of unifying and expanding his kingdom, fully independent of Parthia. Tigranes had already annexed a part of Cappadocia and was extending his reach south, taking over the weak Syrian kingdom. He would also take some territory away from the Parthians, who were busy countering the nomadic invasions on their eastern borders. In time, Tigranes' supreme armies would overwhelm Mesopotamia and occupy Syria, Phoenicia, and Cilicia. Tigranes' policy was to reward the cities that joined him and lay waste to cities that resisted. He amassed huge wealth and moved defeated populations around as though they were pawns on a chessboard. While Mithradates was engaged in his ongoing wars with Rome, Tigranes began building his fabulous new city, Tigranocerta on the Tigris River. Designed to eclipse the magnificence of Susa and Babylon, Tigranocerta was populated with displaced peoples of lands that Tigranes occupied.

Mithradates, however, was unaware of Tigranes' grand plans when he established their alliance in about 94 BCE. After Tigranes wed the Pontic princess Cleopatra, the two kings forged another agreement. In their joint campaigns in Cappadocia and elsewhere, they agreed that Mithradates would always take control of the cities and the land, whereas all the captives and treasure would belong to Tigranes. The bargain tells us that Tigranes had no ambitions in western Anatolia other than capital and captives to enrich Tigranocerta and his empire. Their arrangement also indicates that Mithradates' flow of revenue was already copious and reliable, and that the king of Pontus was more interested in controlling Cappadocia and its neighbors than plunder. Tigranes' invasion of Cappadocia and ouster of the Roman client king would allow Mithradates to regain indirect control of Cappadocia. Moreover, Tigranes' attack would be a way of testing the Roman resolve. Mithradates' preparations for war included very heavy coin minting in 93-89 BC, to pay for large armies and arms.

The tangled situation in Anatolia became even more complex, and the chronology of events is hopelessly confused in the ancient sources. We know that Tigranes dispatched his army, led by two generals,

Mithras and Bagoas, to Cappadocia in about 93 BCE. The weak king Ariobarzanes fled to his protectors in Rome. According to the plan, Tigranes' generals then installed Ariarathes IX on the throne vacated by Ariobarzanes, with Gordius as Regent, to rule Cappadocia on Mithradates' terms.

Tigranes carried out his part of the bargain. He had no interest in making war on Rome on Mithradates' behalf. The countryside of Cappadocia already had been so devastated from years of despoiling armies that Tigranes took more captives than plunder. His army returned to Armenia to pursue Tigranes' own grand strategies³.

Encouraged by his victories and perhaps by the appearance of Halley's Comet later during his reign (87 BCE), Tigranes would later begin referring to himself as the "King of Kings." It is interesting that both Mithradates and Tigranes issued coins decorated with the image of a comet. Comets were evil omens in Rome and the West, but in Anatolia and Persian-influenced lands, comets were signs of hope. Mithradates issued small-denomination comet coins early in his reign, alluding to the pair of spectacular comets associated with his birth and rise to power. Some years later, a comet with a curved tail appeared on silver and copper coins of Armenia minted by Tigranes between 83 and 69 BCE. Armenian coins ordinarily portrayed kings wearing a traditional tiara decorated with two eagles and an eight-rayed star. But these unusual coins show Tigranes II wearing a tiara decorated with a comet trailing a long, curved tail. Since Halley's Comet always has a straight tail, Tigranes' new coins seem to commemorate the earlier comets associated with the charismatic Mithradates. When a third comet—Halley's—appeared in 87 BCE, it would be seen as yet another guarantee of Mithradates' grand destiny and divine approval of Mithradates' and Tigranes' joint victories thus far. Tigranes' comet imagery may have been a public declaration of his commitment to Mithradates' cause. Notably, the tiny coins issued by young Mithradates were anonymous, while Tigranes placed the comet on his tiara with his name and portrait on larger-denomination coins. This might have signaled stronger confidence about the comet symbolism for the two rulers. Possibly, however, the decision may suggest that Tigranes intended to appropriate all three comets to his own reign, to justify his assumption of the title "King of Kings."

In 89 BCE, about five years after Tigranes invaded Cappadocia to aid Mithradates, the rogue Roman commander Manius Aquillius ordered Bithynia's puppet king, Nicomedes IV, to lead his army into Pontus, ravaging the countryside. No Senate authorization had approved this invasion. The Roman coalition was unaware that Mithradates could call up overwhelming forces. According to Appian, Mithradates commanded 250,000 soldiers and 50,000 cavalry (these figures include all the reserves and commitments that Mithradates could count on from allies around the Black Sea and in Armenia). According to Memnon, Mithradates had 190,000 infantry and 10,000 cavalry⁴. The figures may be exaggerated, but the proportions are accepted by modern scholars, and they reflect Mithradates' and Tigranes' extensive networks of alliances. Realistically, Mithradates probably had 90,000 -112,000 against 36,000 -45,000 Roman allied forces. Tigranes contributed 10,000 Armenian cavalrymen mounted on large, powerful Parthian horses, commanded by Mithradates' son Arcathius. Tigranes also sent one of his best generals, Nemanes, as co-commander with Mithradates' Greek general Neoptolemus.

Arcathius and Tigranes' Armenian cavalry chased the enemy off the field. In fear of Mithradates' rapid advance, Aquillius ordered his army to retreat, hoping to reach the stronghold of Protopachion in eastern Bithynia. But Mithradates' army, led by Neoptolemus and the Armenian Nemanes, overtook them, killing 10,000 of Aquillius's men and capturing 300 prisoners⁵.

Mithradates' victorious armies now swept through Anatolia, driving the Romans and their allies before them. The next year, 88 BCE, Mithradates ordered the massacre of tens of thousands of Roman and Italian civilians remaining in Anatolia and sent his navy and army to liberate Greece from Roman rule. His envoys in Athens encouraged the Greeks by describing the great alliance of the powerful kings Mithradates and Tigranes. The rest of the First Mithradatic War did not go well, however. Mithradates lost the battle for Rhodes and suffered devastating defeats in Greece to Sulla's legions.

After Sulla and Mithradates signed the Peace of Dardanus (85 BCE), Sulla returned to Italy, while Mithradates exploited the lenient terms of the treaty to recoup and reorganize his army. The Second Mithradatic War broke out in 83/81 BCE when Murena, an ambitious Roman officer, recklessly invaded Mithradatic lands. Mithradates won

a smashing victory and continued to consolidate his Black Sea Empire, recruiting large armies. He knew that it was only a matter of time before the Romans would be back in Anatolia.

The Third Mithradatic War began in 75/76 BCE, with Lucullus in command but leading reluctant Roman legions. It is interesting that Mithradates' alliance with Tigranes II could strike fear into the hearts of his enemies. During Mithradates' siege of Cyzicus, the defenders were losing hope after Lucullus's defeat at Chalcedon. As Mithradates' siege towers rose to encircle the city walls, his soldiers terrified the Cyzicenes by pointing toward an advancing army camped far away in the distance. They raised the specter of Tigranes' enormous forces, deeply feared by the Romans and their allies⁶. "See those campfires?" they shouted. "Those are Tigranes' great armies of Armenians and Medes, come to help Mithradates!" The army was actually Lucullus's troops, and they soundly defeated Mithradates at Cyzicus and Kabeira in 73-70 BCE. Notably, Lucullus himself was known to remind his soldiers that if they did not destroy Mithradates in Pontus, they would have to face Tigranes' "barbarian hordes."

After Lucullus won a clear and devastating victory over Mithradates at the battle for Kabeira in 70 BCE, the king of Pontus became a fugitive on the run, with about 2,000 cavalry and accompanied by his generals Taxiles and Dorylaus. Taking on supplies, the fugitives escaped Lucullus and rode east to Mithradates' stronghold at Talaura, on the Armenian border, where Mithradates had stashed heirlooms and gold. Then they made their way over rugged mountain passes toward Armenia, counting on Tigranes to give them refuge⁷.

With the Pontic navy no longer supreme in the Black Sea and his army destroyed amid mounting defections, Mithradates learned that his son Machares, viceroy of the Pontic Bosphoran Kingdom, made a deal with the Romans. This meant that Mithradates' only hope for survival was Tigranes, who did agree to shelter his father-in-law and friend. But Mithradates also needed to convince Tigranes—whose burgeoning Armenian empire was now the most formidable bulwark against Roman rule in the East—to help him regain his kingdom of Pontus. Just ahead of the pursuing Lucullus, Mithradates and 2,000 horsemen slipped over the frontier into Armenia and set up camp at one of Tigranes' remote hunting estates.

Thwarted, Lucullus sent his envoy, Appius, to demand that Tigranes turn over the fugitive war criminal Mithradates to the Romans. Tigranes' devious guides promised to conduct Appius to Antioch, Syria, where Tigranes was now based. For months they led Appius on a circuitous route. Finally, in Antioch, Appius was commanded to await the arrival of Tigranes, "King of Kings," who was away subduing Phoenicia. Appius waited for a full year in Antioch.

At last, Shahanshah Tigranes arrived in all his glory, riding a white horse, with four vassal kings running alongside. Appius was summoned to the great hall for Tigranes' first audience with a Roman legate. Unimpressed by all the grandeur, Appius handed over the letter from Lucullus and bluntly stated his mission as an ultimatum: "Lucullus, Imperator of the Roman Army and Governor of the Province of Asia, has sent me to take charge of Mithradates, who is to be brought to Rome as our prisoner and as an ornament in our Triumph. Surrender Mithradates now. If you do not, Rome will declare war on you."

Plutarch described the diplomatic exchange. "Tigranes made every effort to listen to Appius with a pleasant expression and forced smile." But everyone could sense Tigranes' rage. Tigranes rejected the ultimatum. "I will not surrender Mithradates. If the Romans begin a war, the King of Kings will defend himself." Tigranes remained faithful to his friend and ally, Mithradates, because he was so certain that the Romans would not dare to cross the Euphrates into his Armenian kingdom.

But when Appius reported back to Lucullus, the Roman commander felt compelled to follow up on his rash ultimatum. The Roman war on Mithradates that had begun back in 89 BC—a war that Lucullus had twice declared over—now suddenly expanded out of control. Lucullus found himself committed to an unlimited war on Tigranes' vast realm, a land unknown to the Romans, stretching from the Caucasus Mountains south to the Red Sea, reaching from Antioch to Seleucia, a wilderness of deserts and impassable mountains, defended by "untold thousands of nomad-warriors from countless warlike tribes," in Plutarch's words. Lucullus's soldiers were near rebellion when they heard the orders to advance into Tigranes' kingdom. Earlier, Lucullus had played on his men's terror of Tigranes' barbarian armies. Moreover—as both Tigranes and Mithradates knew—Lucullus had no Senatorial authority to expand his campaign against Mithradates beyond the Euphrates. Lucullus was clearly the aggressor in this new campaign. Lucullus marched into

Armenia with 12,000 infantrymen and about 3,000 cavalry, to face down Tigranes and arrest Mithradates, whose hiding place in Armenia was unknown⁸. Some sources claim that Tigranes had 250,000-300,000; but Memnon gives 80,000, and Phlegon of Tralles frag. 12, gives 40,000 infantry and 30,000 cavalry: these figures may be more accurate for the actual numbers during the battle outside Tigranocerta. Certainly Tigranes' army was vast and probably more than twice the size of Lucullus's 30,000 (and the Roman strength of 15,000-20,000 was probably minimized).

Tigranes had arranged for Mithradates and his party to stay at his hunting estate, where they remained for one year and eight months. According to Memnon⁹, although the two allies did not meet at this time, Tigranes provided Mithradates with "bodyguards and all other marks of hospitality." Here, in nearly two years of security provided by Tigranes, Mithradates and his advisors devised new tactics that would define the remainder of the struggle against Rome. In the past, Mithradates had depended on numerically superior, formally arrayed hoplite-style armies marching onto a plain for pitched combat. In the battles to come, light, flexible cavalry attacks, like the guerrilla warfare perfected by the nomad allies of Tigranes, would be crucial. From now on, Mithradates' military strategy would mirror his diplomatic strategies: he would probe for weakness, strike and withdraw with speed, keeping the Romans off balance, powerless to strike back. He and Tigranes would lose spectacularly to Lucullus, but the allied rebel kings would fade back into the eastern highlands and surge back with fresh forces, a way of war that exhausted and confused the Romans.

According to Plutarch and Lucullus's modern biographer Arthur Keaveney, Tigranes insulted Mithradates by sending him to stay in a remote, inhospitable landscape¹⁰. But Kurkjian (1958) and others deny that Tigranes was "cold and unconcerned" about Mithradates. Indeed, the ancient evidence demonstrates that the two allies had enjoyed mutual esteem and rapport since their alliance of 94 BC. It is true that their political styles were very different. Tigranes, now about 70, was an absolute autocrat with little realistic understanding of the Roman threat. In contrast, Mithradates, about 65, accommodated some Greek democratic traditions and he had dealt with Rome for decades. Both men possessed extraordinary physical stamina and intellectual vitality. Each man believed that divine Mithraic comets and oracles had blessed

their reigns. While Mithradates' appreciation for Greek culture ran deeper than Tigranes', as noted above, they shared Persian culture, love of hunting, erudition, and grandiose ambitions. Moreover, their grand goals were compatible and each man hated Rome as a force of darkness and deceit, the enemy of righteousness. Another strong link was Mithradates' daughter, Cleopatra—she was Tigranes' chosen queen and advisor for life, favored above all his concubines.

Tigranes was a dependable military ally whenever Mithradates had called on him, but Tigranes was never enthusiastic or well informed about Mithradates' wars on Rome. He preferred to carve out his own empire far removed from Rome's notice. Mithradates' empire was a useful buffer for Tigranes, which kept the Romans occupied in Anatolia. It seems clear that, instead of snubbing Mithradates when he was a fugitive from Lucullus, Tigranes was happy to arrange for Mithradates' safety and comfort from afar, without arousing Roman anger. Then Tigranes continued with his own imperial imperatives. Tigranes' attention was finally aroused when the Roman envoy Appius rudely delivered Lucullus's insolent demand.

Lucullus's ultimatum spurred Tigranes to meet personally with his father-in-law. Tigranes invited Mithradates to his palace (probably Tigranocerta). The two monarchs spent three days together in private. There were no translators and no witnesses. But, based on personal papers discovered after Mithradates' death, Plutarch speculated that their conversation revolved around casting blame for Mithradates' defeats on others. As evidence, Plutarch pointed to the case of the rhetorician-statesman Metrodorus, a favorite of Mithradates, who had been sent to request aid from Tigranes. At the three-day private meeting, Tigranes revealed to his ally that Metrodorus had urged him to honor Mithradates' request for aid. But then Tigranes had asked Metrodorus whether he could guarantee that such aid would be in Armenia's best interest. Metrodorus had replied honestly, that helping Mithradates might not further Tigranes' ambitions. The philosopher died mysteriously on his return to Pontus. Plutarch implies that Metrodorus may have been killed by Mithradates, whose unerring instinct for betrayal had kept him alive for more than half a century. In contrast, Tigranes felt guilty for his part in Metrodorus's death¹¹.

The two monarchs probably did compare notes about who was trustworthy and who was not, but they also must have conversed about

practical, urgent matters at hand. Tigranes generously gave his friend a contingent of 10,000 expert Armenian cavalrymen. With renewed hope, Mithradates returned to his hunting lodge base camp, to make preparations to depart for Pontus with his new army and cavalry. Tigranes considered the problem solved and turned back to his own business. Both leaders assumed that Mithradates' war with Rome would resume back in Pontus.

But a messenger suddenly arrived in Tigranocerta, shouting that the Romans were coming. Tigranes, angered by this interruption, had the messenger beheaded for "disturbing the peace." It was reasonable for Tigranes to think the messenger's report was a false alarm, because Tigranes was confident that Lucullus had no authorization to invade Armenia. That was a logical assumption. But neither Tigranes or Mithradates knew that Lucullus was now pursuing his own irrational agenda, aggressively attacking Armenia because of Tigranes' refusal to surrender Mithradates. After Tigranes' execution of the messenger, no one else dared to inform the king of Lucullus's approach. It is safe to assume that no one spoke of the great earthquake that recently destroyed several cities in Syria, either. Soothsayers were whispering that it was an omen that Tigranes would no longer rule Syria. Departing Tigranocerta, Tigranes encamped with his grand army in the Taurus Mountains. Unlike his ally Mithradates, who invariably sought out the freshest intelligence however threatening, Tigranes sat in a cocoon of "ignorance while the fires of war blazed around him"¹².

Lucullus, meanwhile, ordered his reluctant army of 15,000-20,000 men to cross the Euphrates River into Armenia. His target was the unfinished city of Tigranocerta, where Tigranes kept his harem and other treasures. Lucullus assumed an attack there would force Tigranes to come out and fight. After his defeat, thought Lucullus, the Armenian king would turn over Mithradates and the long Mithradatic Wars would be over at last.

A courageous general named Mithrobarzanes informed Tigranes about the Roman invasion and the imminent threat to Tigranocerta. Meanwhile, Mithradates, still at the hunting lodge, received the startling news of Lucullus's invasion from his own spies. He immediately canceled his plans to recover his own kingdom of Pontus and turned back with his cavalry to help Tigranes. This reversal of plans reveals the depth of the friendship of Tigranes and Mithradates. Mithradates was

also probably excited about the opportunity to crush the Romans using Tigranes' great resources and numerically superior army.

Mithradates sent several urgent letters and messengers ahead to Tigranes, offering valuable practical advice, based on his own failures in the past while fighting the Romans. Mithradates explained his new ideas for resisting the well-trained legions. He warned Tigranes, "Do not fight the Romans head on. Harass and surround them with your cavalry. Devastate the countryside to reduce them by exhaustion and famine." Mithradates sent his General Taxiles ahead to Tigranes' headquarters, with the same advice, urging Tigranes to stay on the defensive and avoid clashing directly with the Roman legions.

But Tigranes ignored Mithradates' wise counsel and decided to attack Lucullus head on. Given his vastly superior numbers, this was not an irrational decision. But Tigranes should have followed Mithradates' sound advice and knowledge of Roman battle prowess. According to Plutarch and Appian, Tigranes' army numbered about 250,000 soldiers, including 20,000 nomadic archers and slingers and 55,000 cavalry (17,000 cataphracts in heavy chain mail wielding long lances, on large armored Nisaeen horses). Trailing behind the army were hordes of carpenters, road and bridge builders, baggage handlers, grooms, cooks, supply agents, and families, totaling 35,000 people. This enormous force, combining traditional hoplites and guerrilla-style warriors, each division in native armor with traditional weapons and speaking hundreds of dialects, came from Armenia, Media, Syria, Commagene, Gordyene, Sophene, Mesopotamia, Atropatene, Mardia, Adiabene, Arabia, Parthia, and Bactria.

Tigranes led his massive army down from the Taurus mountains to his besieged city of Tigranocerta. He sent 6,000 nomad horsemen ahead to break through the Roman lines—in a brilliant lightning strike they rescued Tigranes' women, children, and valuables. High on a hill above the Tigris, Tigranes and his eldest son Tigranes (by Mithradates' daughter Cleopatra) observed the ant-like Roman army camped across the river. Tigranes' Armenian, Median, and Adiabeni generals spoke of the anticipated spoils, while Tigranes joked: "If those Romans have come as ambassadors, there are far too many of them. If they have come as an invading army, there are far too few!"

Mithradates had not yet arrived, but everyone expected Lucullus to continue with the cautious approach he had followed in Bithynia and

Pontus. No one imagined that Lucullus would provoke a battle against such superior numbers¹³.

But Lucullus's strategy was the opposite of what Mithradates and Tigranes anticipated. Seriously outnumbered, the Roman leader carried out a lightning strike against Tigranes' cumbersome masses. The battle was a tremendous rout for Tigranes, with much confusion and terror, and heavy casualties. Tigranes, shocked at the disaster, rushed with his son and attendants up into the foothills, fleeing in different directions into the mountains. Lucullus that claimed more than 100,000 of Tigranes' infantry and most of the cavalry were killed, while others escaped and many were taken captive. Never had the Romans been so outnumbered, and never had they won so decisively against overwhelming odds¹⁴.

Tigranes' diverse, sprawling army—reminiscent of the Persian King Xerxes' great multinational army deployed against the Greeks in 480 BCE—had been spectacularly successful in all his conquests so far. Obviously, however, Tigranes' massive, polyglot forces also suffered problems of logistics and command and control. Tigranes was ill-prepared and immobilized by Lucullus's blitzkrieg strategy and disciplined legions. Yet, despite this massive victory, Lucullus failed to lay his hands on his enemies Mithradates or Tigranes, nor could he prevent them from melting back into uncharted nomad territory, where they raised fresh armies.

While the battle raged, Mithradates, was approaching the Tigris Valley with 12,000 cavalrymen, unaware of the rout. But as he met survivors fleeing from the battle, the full extent of the catastrophe at Tigranocerta became obvious. At this very bleak moment, after surviving so many personal calamities and cutting short his own hope of recovering his kingdom of Pontus, one might have expected Mithradates to criticize Tigranes for failing to follow his advice and to think only of saving himself. But, as Plutarch pointed out, it is revealing of Mithradates' character and their strong alliance that instead of abandoning Tigranes, Mithradates continued down the mountain in search of his old friend. He found Tigranes, distraught and alone on the road. They embraced and Mithradates offered Tigranes his own horse and spoke with encouragement as they turned back toward Artaxata. Somehow, Mithradates was able to persuade Tigranes that they could still fulfill their grand—and now even more closely intertwined—

destinies. The battle's outcome would have convinced Mithradates that his new indirect strategy was the only way to resist the Romans¹⁵.

Faced with these overwhelming losses, the two fugitive but indomitable kings forged plans to assemble yet another army. Acknowledging his old friend's wisdom and experience, Tigranes appointed Mithradates as the commander and strategist of their new combined forces.

After looting and razing Tigranocerta, Lucullus ventured into Gordyene, but he lost a great many soldiers to ambushes by Tigranes' allies, nomad-archers on horseback who struck and vanished into the hills. Lucullus had to retreat back down to the Tigris, with his soldiers vehemently protesting the hardships, while Mithradates and Tigranes escaped. Lucullus managed to convince himself that he had already neutralized Mithradates and Tigranes and he now dreamed of vanquishing Parthia, loosely allied with Mithradates and Tigranes. But Lucullus's authority over his troops was evaporating.

Meanwhile in Armenia, in 69 BCE, Mithradates and Tigranes energetically devoted themselves to raising fresh armies, recruiting warriors from Armenia and the warlike tribes of Colchis, Caucasia, and the steppes beyond the Caspian Sea. Mithradates, as supreme commander, personally selected 70,000 Armenians to be trained as infantry. The rest of the population was set to manufacturing armor and weapons. Tigranes agreed with Mithradates' strategy, ordering General Taxiles to divide their new army into Roman-style cohorts, and drilling them in Roman battle tactics, which would be needed to drive the Romans out of Pontus. But Mithradates and Tigranes were also counting on the maneuverability of smaller, flexible formations to fight in Armenia and eastern Pontus, where Lucullus's cavalry would be hobbled by rugged, unfamiliar terrain. They recruited an extraordinarily large cavalry force, about 35,000 horsemen and women from Caucasia (between the Black and Caspian seas) and beyond. This light-armed, nimble cavalry formed the heart of Mithradates' and Tigranes' new army.

Mithradates and Tigranes stockpiled large supplies of grain, and they sent envoys to Parthia to solicit money and troops. One of Mithradates' personal letters to the Parthian king was preserved by the Roman historian Sallust. Whether or not it is the actual wording of Mithradates' message is debated by historians, but the essence of the letter of 69 BCE demonstrates Mithradates' persuasive diplomacy¹⁶. There is no doubt

that Mithradates communicated with Parthia; Parthian royalty was represented in Mithradates' early monument on Delos. The message is plausible, the language is Mithradates' style and it appears to be either genuine or based on other authentic letters and speeches¹⁷. "You have great resources of men, weapons, and gold," wrote Mithradates. "It is inevitable that Rome will make war on you to obtain those resources. Ask yourself, if Tigranes and I are defeated, would you really be better able to resist the Romans? Ally with us, while Tigranes' kingdom is entire and while I have an army of soldiers trained in warfare with Romans. If you send us help now, Tigranes and I can win this war at the expense of our armies, far from your borders, and with no effort, losses, or risk on the part of Parthia." The overture endeavored to convince Parthia that Rome was a serious threat and that helping Mithradates and Tigranes was in Parthia's best interests. Ultimately, however, the king of Parthia negotiated with Mithradates and Tigranes—and with Lucullus—but he aided neither side.

In 68 BCE, Lucullus took up his original goal to capture Mithradates, who was being protected by Tigranes. Lucullus's soldiers finally agreed to march to Tigranes' headquarters in Artaxata, the "Armenian Carthage." Marching up into Armenia's high plateau and mountains, however, the Romans found themselves without food and supplies and continually harassed by mounted archers allied with Tigranes; Lucullus was constantly under fire without being able to land a blow. His men were near mutiny. At last, however, a huge cloud of dust showed the approach of Tigranes and Mithradates. The two renegade commanders appeared, flanked by cavalry from Atropatene and leading an army of such splendor and might that Lucullus was suddenly struck with fear. He tried to strike at the Atropateni flanks, but they and the immense army melted away into the hillsides instead of meeting the Romans head on¹⁸.

Indeed, Lucullus found it impossible to engage with Tigranes and Mithradates, who constantly withdrew, luring Lucullus to try to pursue them. Skirmish after skirmish proved indecisive. Lucullus and his army were led deeper into Armenia's inhospitable highlands. Plutarch, Appian, and other ancient (and modern) historians have criticized the "poor" battle performance of Mithradates and Tigranes and their army of "barbarians," accusing them of running away over and over again, refusing to fight the Romans head on. Appian, for example, remarked

that all that summer and fall, Lucullus could not “draw Mithradates out to fight.” Plutarch even claimed that Mithradates “fled disgracefully” because he could not endure the shouting and clamor of battle. The barbarian warriors “did not shine in action,” continued Plutarch. “Even in a slight skirmish with the Roman cavalry, they would give way before the advancing infantry, scattering to the right and left.” Maddeningly, the Gordyeni and Atropateni kept galloping off instead of “engaging at close quarters with the Romans.” The “pursuit was long and exhausting. The Romans,” concluded Plutarch, “were worn out.” But as I have pointed out elsewhere, this result was exactly the point of Mithradates’ and Tigranes’ guerilla-style tactics¹⁹.

Like Lucullus, the ancient historians, as well as some modern historians, failed to understand the new battle strategies that Mithradates and Tigranes had adopted, employing an asymmetrical style of fighting that baffled the Romans. Mithradates and Tigranes gave way in close quarters, they avoid all direct conflict and turned the enemies’ own momentum against them, like masters of Zen martial arts. The Romans grew more and more frustrated, and Lucullus had no idea where the enemy was hiding, or when they would strike next²⁰. By 67 BCE Mithradates and Tigranes had exhausted and flummoxed Lucullus, who lost command over his mutinous men and had to retreat down to Nisibis.

Mithradates was now free to recover his kingdom of Pontus. His ally Tigranes would arrive later to retake Cappadocia. In 67 BCE, Mithradates led an army against the two Roman legions occupying Pontus and won a great victory at Zela, taking back his kingdom. After the battle, Lucullus finally arrived in Pontus, but Mithradates had already withdrawn out of reach. He was in western Armenia on his way to meet Tigranes, who was bringing an army to help secure Mithradates’ kingdom. Lucullus ordered his army march to the point where the two grand armies would meet, hoping to defeat the pair of rogue kings once and for all. But mutiny spread throughout Lucullus’s legions. Lucullus watched helplessly as Tigranes the Great rolled across Cappadocia, taking it over for the third time since the Mithradatic Wars first began. Tigranes returned to Artaxata, while Mithradates regrouped on the borders of Pontus and Armenia.

In Rome, Lucullus was denounced for wasting years, money, and lives, and prolonging the war for his own profit. Roman officials observed the

collapse of the mission—the mission Sulla had failed to accomplish, the mission that Lucullus had claimed to have achieved, but failed. Lucullus was relieved of his command and recalled to Rome. Pompey the Great took over the command of the unfinished Third Mithradatic War, but his arrival in Anatolia was delayed until 66 BCE, by his well-financed war on the pirates who were infesting the Mediterranean.

In 66 BCE, Pompey the Great was en route to Pontus with a large army and navy, authorized to make war on both Mithradates and Tigranes. Pompey had even forged an alliance with the king of Parthia. Mithradates' actions at this time appear to have been calculated to lure Pompey deeper into the unfamiliar, rugged terrain between Pontus and Armenia, as he and Tigranes had done with Lucullus. When Pompey caught up with Mithradates' position, Mithradates refused to fight directly. Instead he simply drove back the Romans with his cavalry—and then disappeared into the thick forests of the mountains in eastern Pontus. Mithradates camped on a mountainous stronghold, which appeared inaccessible. Later that year, however, Pompey used a full moon to make a surprise attack and completely overwhelmed Mithradates in a decisive battle there. Miraculously, Mithradates escaped, along with about 2,000-3,000 surviving cavalry. They headed east over the mountains, crossing the headwaters of the Euphrates into Armenia. Mithradates sent a messenger to Tigranes to request refuge again.

But the long friendship and alliance between Pontus and Armenia had frayed, fatally weakened by Mithradates' devastating loss in Pontus to Pompey in 66 BCE. Tigranes' queen, Cleopatra, begged her husband to help her father, Mithradates. But Tigranes was too worried about Roman retribution. He refused to give Mithradates protection in Armenia again. In fact, Tigranes had put a price on his old friend's head, probably to impress the Romans and convince them that he had truly broken off relations with Mithradates. Tigranes offered a reward for the capture of Mithradates, but the reward was laughably stingy for such a fabulously wealthy monarch, only 100 talents. The meager reward may indicate that Tigranes was reluctant to hurt Mithradates' chances of escaping the Romans yet one more time²¹.

Denied refuge in Armenia, Mithradates devised an audacious plan to hide out that fall and winter on the inaccessible north coast of Colchis (modern Republic of Georgia). In 66/65 BCE, he and his band of survivors successfully crossed the formidable barrier of the Caucasus

Mountains. Crossing the Don and Scythia, they reached Pantikapaion in his Bosporan Kingdom, ruled by his son Machares, who committed suicide upon his arrival. Mithradates set up headquarters here and planned to continue his war on Rome. It is not clear whether Tigranes was aware of Mithradates' remarkable survival and feat of trekking to the Crimea. Pompey, meanwhile, completely lost track of his prey at the foot of the Caucasus. Giving Mithradates up for dead, Pompey decided to cross the Lesser Caucasus range into northern Armenia, intending to attack Tigranes' stronghold, Artaxata. Pompey's men suffered severe hardships, thirst, and ambush, because the guides—Albanoi and Iberi prisoners of war, who were sympathetic to Mithradates and to Tigranes—deliberately misled him²².

As Pompey approached Artaxata, Tigranes, nearly 75 years old, surrendered. He had lost his will to fight. His son Tigranes (Mithradates' grandson) had revolted and allied with Phraates of Parthia, aiding the Romans. Tigranes had to assume that his old friend Mithradates was beaten at last, perhaps entombed in an icy grave in the Caucasus. So Tigranes accepted Pompey's terms in 66 BCE: in exchange for 6,000 talents and the surrender of Mesopotamia, Syria, and Phoenicia, Tigranes was pardoned for furthering the war by helping Mithradates.

At Pompey's Triumph to celebrate his eastern victories (61 BCE), a host of 324 captives marched in his parade in Rome, among them some of Mithradates' children and his sister, captured in the Bosporan Kingdom. But two large golden statues of Mithradates had to stand in for the real "untamed king of Pontus," Mithradates the Great, Rome's most relentless enemy, because he had escaped capture for the last time, by committing suicide in 63 BC. Standing in for Tigranes the Great, safe on his throne in Artaxata, was his son Tigranes the Younger (Mithradates' grandson) and Zosimé, Tigranes' courtesan. There were hundreds of carts loaded with fabulous treasures plundered from Tigranes' and Mithradates' rich cities. Tigranes the Younger was strangled after the parade; Pompey sent all the other captives back to their homes.

Pompey boasted that he had accomplished what Sulla and Lucullus had failed to do, claiming credit for Mithradates' death. The inscription on Pompey's dedication of war spoils announced that Pompey the Great had "completed a thirty years' war and routed, scattered, slew, or received the surrender of 12,183,000 people; he sank or captured 846 ships and

subdued the lands from the Sea of Azov to the Red Sea.” Pompey bragged that he had “restored to the Roman People the command of the seas and triumphed over Asia, Pontus, Armenia, Paphlagonia, Cappadocia, Cilicia, Syria, the Scythians, Jews, Albanoi, Iberi, Arabs, Cretans, Bastarnae, and, in addition to these, over King Mithradates and King Tigranes”²³.

After Pompey’s triumph, Tigranes continued to rule Armenia as a Friend of Rome until his death at age 85 in 55 BC. He outlived his old ally Mithradates the Great of Pontus, who killed himself during the revolt of his own son Pharnaces, in Pantikapaion, in 63 BCE. Under the Roman Empire, Pontus and Armenia were no longer autonomous states with independent foreign policies.