CHAPTER TWO

A COMPLEX STRATEGY:
SULLA BETWEEN ATTICA AND BOEOTIA

The level of the military threat that Mithridates posed to Rome must not be overrated. The victories that the so-called ‘king of Pontus’ obtained at the beginning of the conflict were mainly owed to the inadequate presence of Roman legions in the Greek East and to the parallel commitment in the Social War, rather than to the qualities of his forces. As soon as Rome decided to intervene directly, the army led by Sulla, which soon included the contingent taken to Asia by Flavius Fimbria, quickly got control of the situation.¹ According to Appian, Mithridates realised that defeat was close immediately after Sulla’s arrival in Greece. Hence, he ruthlessly chose to ravage Asia Minor, aware that he would not manage to keep it for long.² It is the political strategy chosen by the King, however, that deserves to be considered more carefully here. His initiatives, although not supported by an adequate military force, were founded on an understanding of the economic aspects of Roman supremacy, based on the circulation of silver coinage, fiscal revenues and goods in the Mediterranean world. In this system Asia Minor played a pivotal role: for about five years, Mithridates effectively stopped the flow of revenues from província Asia to the Roman West (those from Greece were comparatively almost irrelevant), undermining the financial stability of Italy. Moreover, his alliance with the pirates, however unclear to us in its details, was making the Eastern Mediterranean inaccessible to Roman ships and trade.³

Although his background was Persian, Mithridates was able to talk to the Greeks like a Hellenistic king.⁴ In Athens, for instance, he accepted

¹ On Fimbria’s victories in Asia Minor, see Liv. Per. 83.1–2; Memn. FGrHist 434 §24; vir. ill. 70.2–4. On the betrayal of his army, see Liv. Per. 83.8; vir. ill. 75.4; Vell. 2.24.1. See also de Blois 2007, 172–173.
² App. Mithr. 92.416; cf. Liv. Per. 82.5.
³ See Marasco 1987, 135–143; de Souza 1999, 116–118.
⁴ On the Persian background of the Mithridatids, see Bosworth-Wheatley 1998; Mitchell 2002, 50–59; Mitchell 2005b, 528–529. See Reinach 1887, 107–108 and Rei-
election as eponymous archon for 88/87 BC, using a typical propagandistic device of the Hellenistic dynasts in an explicitly anti-Roman key. At the same time, his whole strategy was innovative. He aimed at the unification of Asia Minor under his rule; no one had ever attempted, or attained, this goal since the day of Alexander the Great. What remains of Mithridates’ propaganda in the Greek cities of Asia Minor shows his attempt to foster a common Asiatic identity, involving both the Greek and the non-Greek elements. He carefully handled the matter of local and civic identities, especially when they could be used in open polemic against Rome. His decision not to abolish the *Moukieia*, the festival which the cities of the province of Asia organised in honour of Quintus Mucius Scaevola, a governor who successfully limited the abuses of the publicani in the 90s, is quite instructive in this respect.

Indeed, the main question unveiled by Mithridates’ attempt was the deep crisis in the relationship between Rome and the local elites in the East. Mithridates had been actively supported by most of the cities he had to come to terms with, whose elites, usually without evidence of internal clashes being left on the record, were happy to take the newcomer’s side. Rome had to pursue a double plan: winning the war, and then rebuilding a constructive relationship with those she had just defeated and brought back under its rule. It was Sulla who was expected to carry it out successfully. The complexity of the situation became quite clear as soon as he arrived in Greece.

Greece was necessarily the first step of Sulla’s campaign, both for geographical and strategic reasons: it was on his way to Asia Minor—the core of the conflict and of Mithridates’ influence—and it was a region where Rome could still rely on a number of allied communi-