

From Village to Empire: an Introduction to the History of Rome

Lecture 12: Pompey the Great



Pompey raises an army

Plutarch, *Pompey* 6: At this time, then, Pompey was tarrying in the Italian province of Picenum, partly because he had estates there, but most because he had a liking for its cities, which were dutifully and kindly disposed towards him as his father's son. **And when he saw the best and most prominent citizens forsaking their homes and hastening to the camp of Sulla as to a haven of refuge, he himself would not deign to go to him as a fugitive, nor empty-handed, nor with requests for help, but only after conferring some favour first, in a way that would gain him honour, and with an armed force.** Wherefore he tried to rouse up the people of Picenum and made test of their allegiance. They readily listened to him and paid no heed to the emissaries of Carbo. Indeed, when a certain Veditius remarked that Pompey had run away from pedagogues to be a demagogue among them, they were so incensed that they fell upon Veditius at once and killed him. [continues...]

Pompey raises an army

After this, Pompey, who was only twenty-three years old, and who had not been appointed general by anybody whomsoever, conferred the command upon himself, and setting up a tribunal in the market-place of Auximum, a large city, issued an edict ordering the chief men there, two brothers named Ventidius, who were acting against him in Carbo's interest, to leave the city. Then he proceeded to levy soldiers, and after appointing centurions and commanders for them all in due form, made a circuit of the other cities, doing the same thing. All the partisans of Carbo withdrew and gave place to him, and the rest gladly offered their services to him, so that in a short time he had mustered three complete legions, and provided them with food, baggage-wagons, carriages, and other needful equipment. Then he led his forces towards Sulla, not in haste, nor even with a desire to escape observation, but tarrying on the march as he harried the enemy, and endeavouring to detach from Carbo's interest all that part of Italy through which he passed.



83 Sulla lands in Italy

Cn. Papirius Carbo

Cn. Domitius Ahenobarbus

Pompey's triumph

Plutarch, *Pompey* 14: After this, Pompey asked for a triumph, but Sulla opposed his request. The law, he said, permitted only a consul or a praetor to celebrate a triumph, but no one else. Therefore the first Scipio, after conquering the Carthaginians in Spain in far greater conflicts, did not ask for a triumph; for he was not consul, nor even praetor. And if Pompey, who had scarcely grown a beard as yet, and who was too young to be a senator, should ride into the city in a triumph, it would not only make Sulla's government altogether odious, but also Pompey's honour. This was what Sulla said to Pompey, declaring that he would not allow his request, but would oppose him and thwart his ambition if he refused to listen to him.

Pompey, however, was not cowed, but bade Sulla reflect that more worshipped the rising than the setting sun, intimating that his own power was on the increase, while that of Sulla was on the wane and fading away. Sulla did not hear the words distinctly, but seeing, from their looks and gestures, that those who did hear them were amazed, he asked what it was that had been said. When he learned what it was, he was astounded at the boldness of Pompey, and cried out twice in succession: 'Let him triumph!' [continues...]

Pompey's triumph

Further, when many showed displeasure and indignation at his project, Pompey, we are told, was all the more desirous of annoying them, and tried to ride into the city on a chariot drawn by four elephants; for he had brought many from Africa which he had captured from its kings. But the gate of the city was too narrow, and he therefore gave up the attempt and changed over to his horses. Moreover, when his soldiers, who had not got as much as they expected, were inclined to raise a tumult and impede the triumph, he said he did not care at all, but would rather give up his triumph than truckle to them. Then Servilius, a man of distinction, and one who had been most opposed to Pompey's triumph, said he now saw that Pompey was really great, and worthy of the honour. And it is clear that he might also have been easily made a senator at that time, had he wished it; but he was not eager for this, as they say, since he was in the chase for reputation of a surprising sort. And indeed it would have been nothing wonderful for Pompey to be a senator before he was of age for it; but it was a dazzling honour for him to celebrate a triumph before he was a senator. And this contributed not a little to win him the favour of the multitude; for the people were delighted to have him still classed among the knights after a triumph.



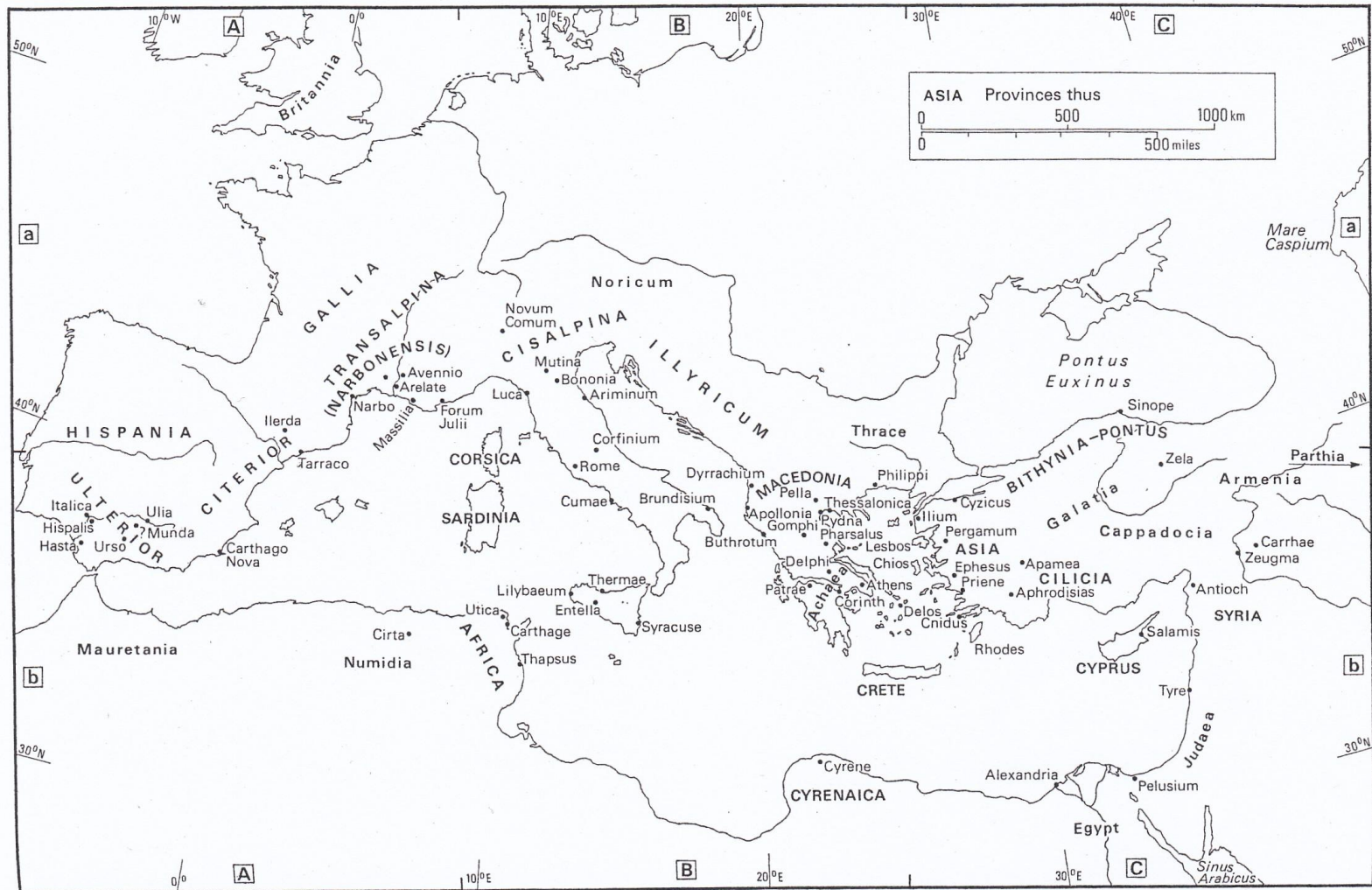
M. Aemilius Lepidus

Q. Lutatius Catulus

Q. Sertorius

Metellus Pius

M. Perperna





Spartacus

M. Licinius Crassus

Pompey returns from Spain and is elected consul

Plutarch, *Pompey* 21-22: After this, he remained in Spain long enough to quell the greatest disorders and compose and settle such affairs as were in the most inflammatory state; then he led his army back to Italy, where, as chance would have it, he found the servile war at its height. For this reason, too, Crassus, who had the command in that war, precipitated the battle at great hazard, and was successful, killing twelve thousand three hundred of the enemy. Even in this success, however, fortune somehow or other included Pompey, since five thousand fugitives from the battle fell in his way, all of whom he slew, and then stole a march on Crassus by writing to the senate that Crassus had conquered the gladiators in a pitched battle, but that he himself had extirpated the war entirely. And it was agreeable to the Romans to hear this said and to repeat it, so kindly did they feel towards him; while as for Spain and Sertorius, there was no one who would have said, even in jest, that the entire work of their subjugation was performed by any one else than Pompey. [continues...]

Pompey returns from Spain and is elected consul

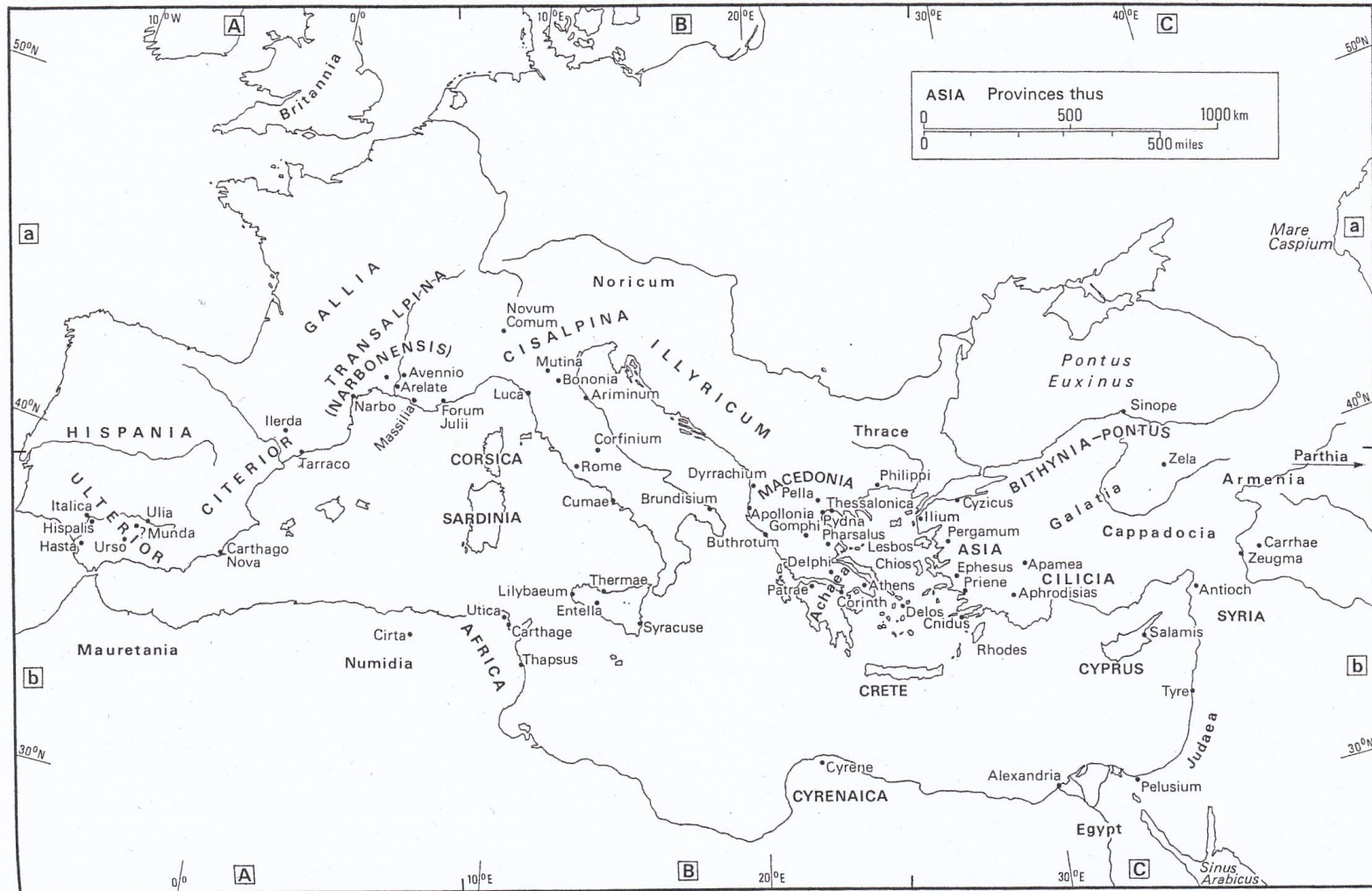
Nevertheless, mingled with the great honour shown the man and the great expectations cherished of him, there was also considerable suspicion and fear; men said he would not disband his army, but would make his way by force of arms and absolute power straight to the polity of Sulla. Wherefore those who ran out and greeted him on his way, out of their goodwill, were no more numerous than those who did it out of fear. But Pompey soon removed this suspicion also by declaring that he would disband his army after his triumph. Then there remained but one accusation for envious tongues to make, namely, that he devoted himself more to the people than to the senate, and had determined to restore the authority of the tribunate, which Sulla had overthrown, and to court the favour of the many; which was true. For there was nothing on which the Roman people had more frantically set their affections, or for which they had a greater yearning, than to behold that office again. Pompey therefore regarded it as a great good fortune that he had the opportunity for this political measure, since he could have found no other favour with which to repay the goodwill of his fellow-citizens, if another had anticipated him in this. [continues...]

Pompey returns from Spain and is elected consul

[22] Accordingly, a second triumph was decreed him, and the consulship. It was not on this account, however, that men thought him admirable and great, nay, they considered this circumstance a proof of his splendid distinction, that Crassus, the richest statesman of his time, the ablest speaker, and the greatest man, who looked down on Pompey himself and everybody else, had not the courage to sue for the consulship until he had asked the support of Pompey. Pompey, moreover, was delighted, since he had long wanted an opportunity of doing him some service and kindness, and therefore granted his request readily and solicited the people in his behalf, announcing that he should be no less grateful to them for such a colleague than for the consulship. Notwithstanding, again they had been elected consuls, they differed on all points, and were constantly in collision. In the senate, Crassus had more weight; but among the people the power of Pompey was great. For he gave them back their tribunate, and suffered the courts of justice to be transferred again to the knights by law.

M. Antonius

A. Gabinius; *lex Gabinia* (67)



Pompey given extraordinary powers to deal with the pirates

Plutarch, *Pompey* 25: This power [of the pirates] extended its operations over the whole of our Mediterranean Sea, making it unnavigable and closed to all commerce. This was what most of all inclined the Romans, who were hard put to it to get provisions and expected a great scarcity, to send out Pompey with a commission to take the sea away from the pirates. Gabinius, one of Pompey's intimates, drew up a law which gave him, not an admiralty, but an out-and-out monarchy and irresponsible power over all men. For the law gave him dominion over the sea this side of the pillars of Hercules, over all the mainland to the distance of four hundred furlongs from the sea. These limits included almost all places in the Roman world, and the greatest nations and most powerful kings were comprised within them. Besides this, he was empowered to choose fifteen legates from the senate for the several principalities, and to take from the public treasuries and the tax-collectors as much money as he wished, and to have two hundred ships, with full power over the number and levying of soldiers and oarsmen. [continues...]

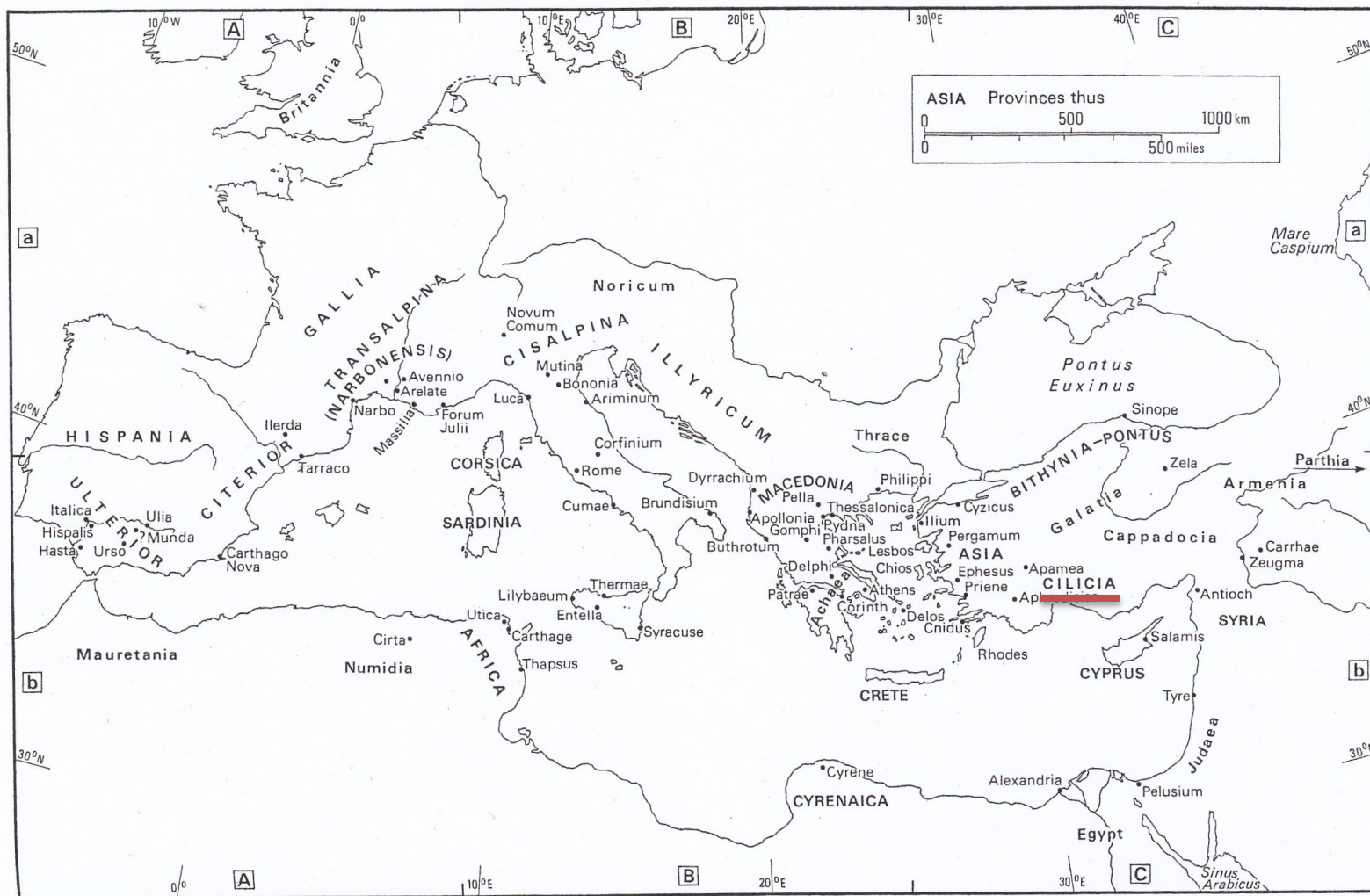
Pompey given extraordinary powers to deal with the pirates

When these provisions of the law were read in the assembly, the people received them with excessive pleasure, but the chief and most influential men of the senate thought that such unlimited and absolute power, while it was beyond the reach of envy, was yet a thing to be feared. Therefore they all opposed the law, with the exception of Caesar; he advocated the law, not because he cared in the least for Pompey, but because from the outset he sought to ingratiate himself with the people and win their support. The rest vehemently attacked Pompey. And when one of the consuls told him that if he emulated Romulus he would not escape the fate of Romulus, he was near being torn in pieces by the multitude. Moreover, when Catulus came forward to speak against the law the people had regard enough for him to be quiet for some time; but after he had spoken at length in Pompey's praise and without any disparagement of him, and then counselled the people to spare such a man and not expose him to successive wars and perils, asking, 'Whom else will you have if you lose him?' all with one accord replied, 'Yourself.' Catulus, accordingly, since he could not persuade them, retired; but when Roscius came forward to speak, no one would listen to him. He therefore made signs with his fingers that they should not choose Pompey alone to this command, but give him a colleague. At this, we are told, the people were incensed and gave forth such a shout that a raven flying over the forum was stunned by it and fell down into the throng. From this it appears that such falling of birds is not due to a rupture and division of the air wherein a great vacuum is produced, but that they are struck by the blow of the voice, which raises a surge and billow in the air when it is born aloft loud and strong.

Pompey defeats the pirates

Plutarch, *Pompey* 26: For five hundred ships were manned for him, and a hundred and twenty thousand men-at-arms and five thousand horsemen were raised. Twenty-four men who had held command or served as praetors were chosen from the senate by him, and he had two quaestors. And since the prices of provisions immediately fell, the people were moved to say in their joy that the very name of Pompey had put an end to the war.

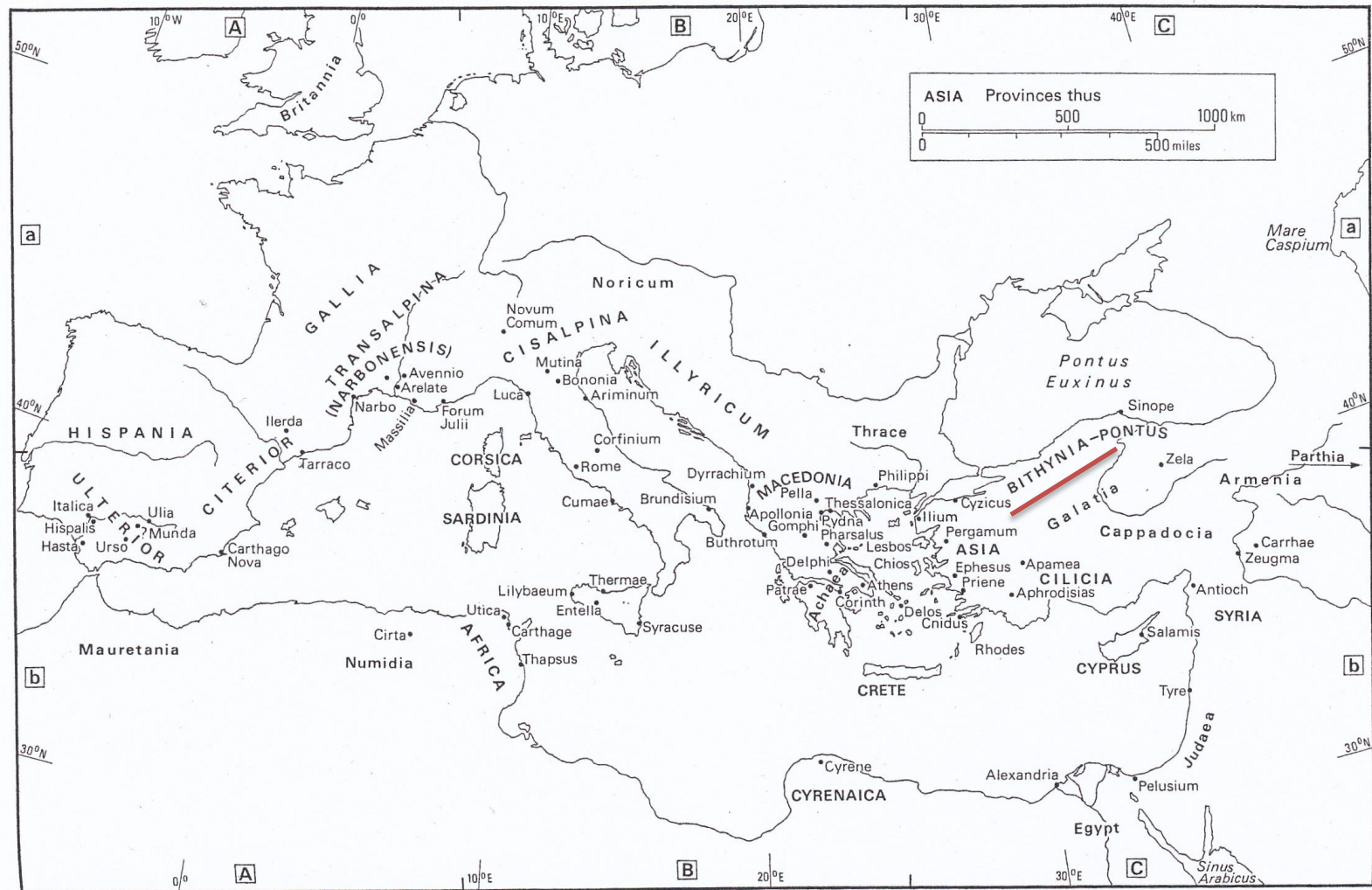
However, he divided the waters and the adjacent coasts of the Mediterranean Sea into thirteen districts, and assigned to each a certain number of ships with a commander, and with his forces thus scattered in all quarters he encompassed whole fleets of piratical ships that fell in his way, and straightway hunted them down and brought them into port; others succeeded in dispersing and escaping, and sought their hive, as it were, hurrying from all quarters into Cilicia. Against these Pompey intended to proceed in person with his sixty best ships. He did not, however, sail against them until he had entirely cleared of their pirates the Tyrrhenian Sea, the Libyan Sea, and the sea about Sardinia, Corsica, and Sicily, in forty days all told. This was owing to his own tireless energy and the zeal of his lieutenants.



C. Manilius; *lex Manilia* (66)

Mithridates

Nicomedes IV



Pompey given command in the east

Plutarch, *Pompey* 30: When word was brought to Rome that the war against the pirates was at an end, and that Pompey, now at leisure, was visiting the cities, Manilius, one of the popular tribunes, proposed a law giving Pompey all the country and forces which Lucullus commanded, with the addition, too, of Bithynia, which Glabrio had, and the commission to wage war upon Mithridates and Tigranes, the kings, retaining also his naval force and his dominion over the sea as he had originally received them. But this meant the placing of the Roman supremacy entirely in the hands of one man; for the only provinces which were held to be excluded from his sway by the former law, namely, Phrygia, Lycaonia, Galatia, Cappadocia, Cilicia, Upper Colchis, and Armenia, these were now added to it, together with the military forces which Lucullus had used in his conquest of Mithridates and Tigranes. But though Lucullus was thus robbed of the glory of his achievements, and was receiving a successor who would enjoy his triumph rather than prosecute the war, this was of less concern to the aristocratic party, although they did think that the man was unjustly and thanklessly treated... [continues...]

Pompey given command in the east

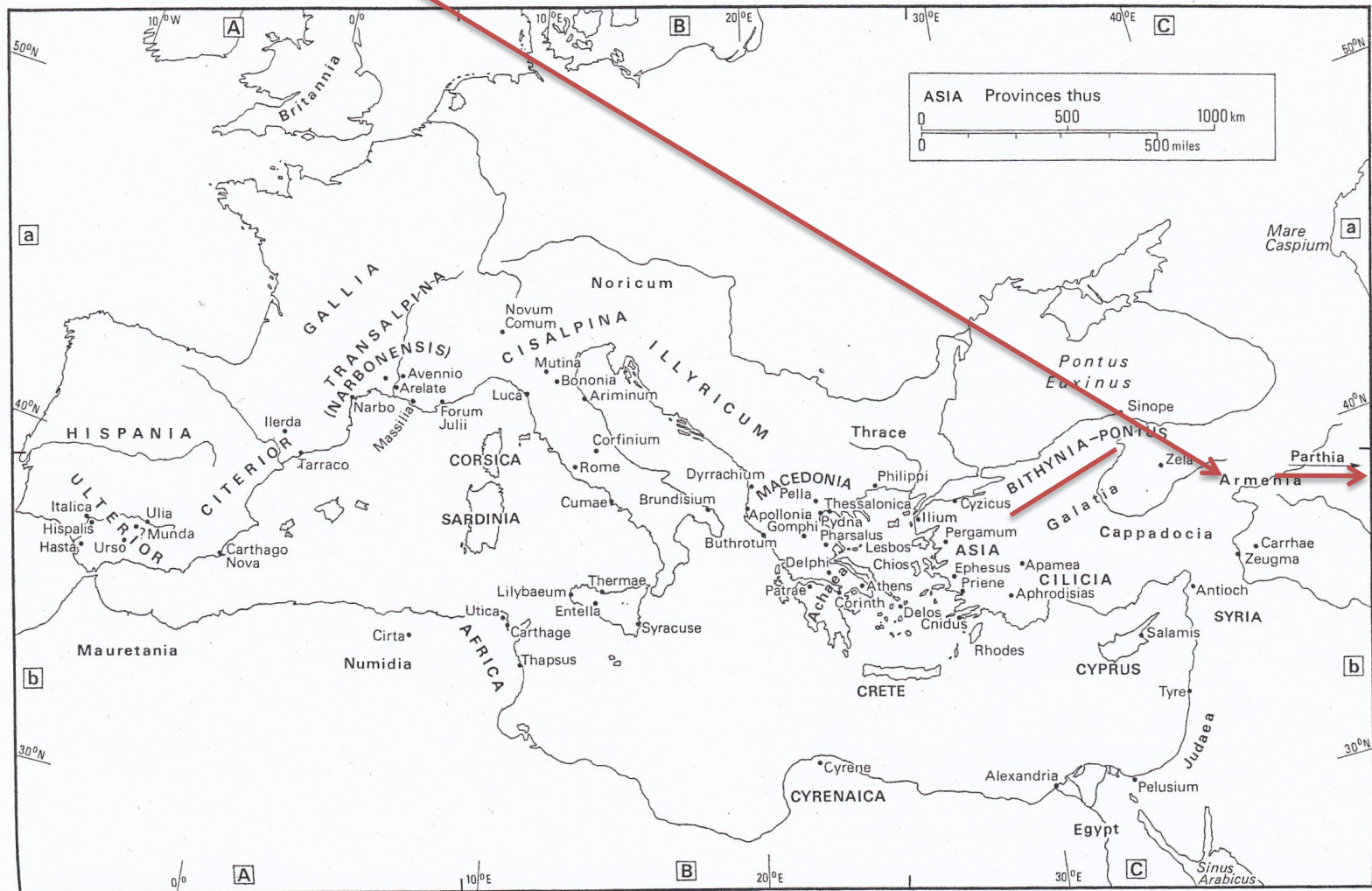
... they were, however, displeased at the power given to Pompey, which they regarded as establishing a tyranny, and privately exhorted and encouraged one another to attack the law, and not to surrender their freedom. But when the time came, their hearts failed them through fear of the people, and all held their peace except Catulus; he denounced the law at great length and the tribune who proposed it, and when none of the people would listen to him, he called out in loud tones from the Rostra urging the senate again and again to seek out a mountain, as their forefathers had done, or a lofty rock, whither they might fly for refuge and preserve their freedom. But still the law was passed by all the tribes, as we are told, and Pompey, in his absence, was proclaimed master of almost all the powers which Sulla had exercised after subduing the city in armed warfare. Pompey himself, however, on receiving his letters and learning what had been decreed, while his friends surrounded him with their congratulations, frowned, we are told, smote his thigh, and said, in the tone of one who was already oppressed and burdened with command: 'Alas for my endless tasks! How much better it were to be an unknown man, if I am never to cease from military service, and cannot lay aside this load of envy and spend my time in the country with my wife!' As he said this, even his intimate friends could not abide his dissimulation; they knew that his enmity towards Lucullus gave fuel to his innate ambition and love of power, and made him all the more delighted.

L. Licinius Lucullus

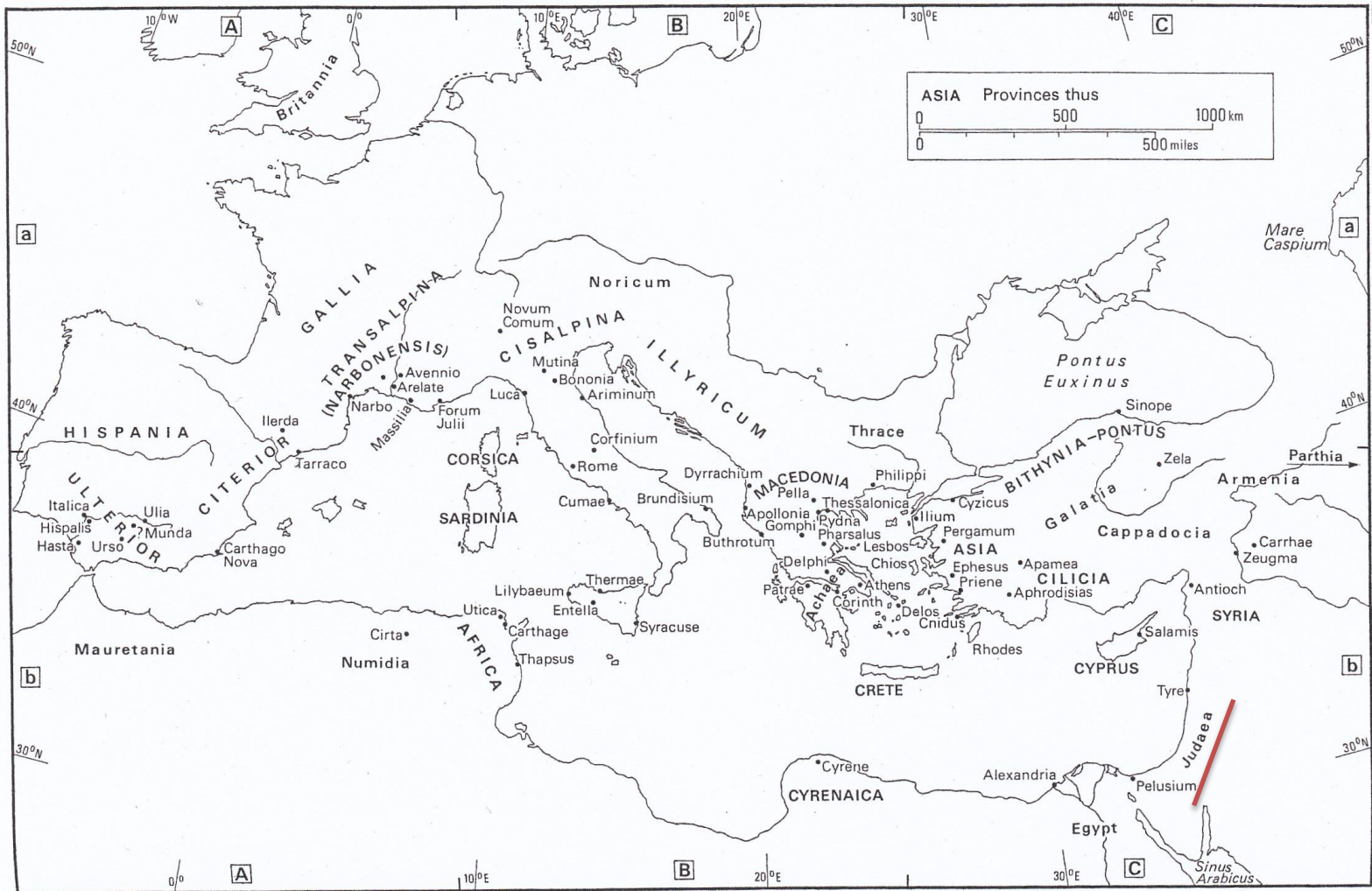
Cabira



Tigranes Armenia



John Hyrcanus
Aristobulus





Relevant reading:

- Gabba, E. (1994), 'Rome and Italy: the Social war', in J. A. Crook, *et al.*, eds., *The Cambridge Ancient History*, volume 9: The last age of the Roman republic 146-43 B.C., second edition, 104-128.
- Gruen, E. (1974), *The Last Generation of the Roman Republic*, Berkeley.
- Hind, J. G. F. (1994), 'Mithridates', in J. A. Crook, *et al.*, eds., *The Cambridge Ancient History*, volume 9: The last age of the Roman republic 146-43 B.C., second edition, 129-164.
- Scullard, H. H., (1982), *From the Gracchi to Nero*, fifth edition, London.
- Seager, R. (1979), *Pompey: A Political Biography*, Oxford.
- Seager, R. (1994), 'The rise of Pompey', in J. A. Crook, *et al.*, eds., *The Cambridge Ancient History*, volume 9: The last age of the Roman republic 146-43 B.C., second edition, 208-228.
- Sherwin-White, A. N. (1994), 'Lucullus, Pompey and the east', in J. A. Crook, *et al.*, eds., *The Cambridge Ancient History*, volume 9: The last age of the Roman republic 146-43 B.C., second edition, 229-273.
- Wiseman, T. P. (1994), 'Caesar, Pompey and Rome, 59-50 B.C.', in J. A. Crook, *et al.*, eds., *The Cambridge Ancient History*, volume 9: The last age of the Roman republic 146-43 B.C., second edition, 368-423.