THE GALATIAN GENOCIDE

“these are degenerates, a mongrel race …”.

The Roman commander Gnaeus Manlius Vulso to his troops before the Galatian genocide
(Livy 38:17)

In 192 BC Antiochus III (the Great) invaded Greece, and was elected the commander in chief of the Aetolian League. Declaring himself the “champion of Greek freedom against Roman domination”, Antiochus waged war against the Roman Republic in mainland Greece, only to be defeated by the Romans under Manius Acilius Glabrio at Thermopylae in 191 BC, forcing him to withdraw to Asia Minor.

The Romans were subsequently drawn into Asia as allies of Pergamum, and against the armies of Antiochus and his allies – the Galatian Celts. Antiochus appears to have
enlisted the support of the Galatians through a mixture of threats and promises (App., syr., II, 6), and throughout the course of the war he made extensive use of Celtic troops (Livy, 37:38; 38:18). At the decisive battle of Magnesia ad Sipylum, in 190 BC, he relied heavily on the Galatians, especially their cavalry. Despite the support of the Celts, the Romans, led by Scipio Asiaticus, subsequently won a resounding victory over Antiochus at Magnesia, and thus the war.

In the aftermath of this victory the new Roman commander, Gnaeus Manlius Vulso, blazed a path through the region, looting, robbing and extorting plunder from the local population, and destroying those who resisted (Livy 38:15). However, this was only a foretaste of what had was to come, for the Roman commander had set himself a very specific task – the extermination of the Asian Celts.

A MONGREL RACE

The rationale behind Manlius’ campaign against the Galatians in 189 BC is a valuable insight into the Roman psyche. Unlike the rich cities which the Romans had just plundered, the area in which the Galatians lived was neither rich nor fertile. Indeed, much of the region in which the Galatians lived was barren and extremely poor. For example, the Axylon region inhabited by the Tolistobii (-bogi) tribe is described thus – ‘not only does it bear nothing in the shape of timber, but not even brambles or thorn bushes grow here, or anything which can serve for fuel. The inhabitants use cow-dung instead of wood’ (Livy, 38:18). Neither was Manlius under orders from Rome to destroy the Galatians. Indeed, he would later be called to task for the Galatian campaign by his enemies in Rome before the senate. Here a section of the testimony of L. Furius Purpurio and L. Aemilius Paulus against him – ‘When he found that the king’s subjects remained perfectly quiet and that there was nothing to justify hostilities, he led his troops round against the Gallograeci, a nation against whom no declaration of war had been made either by the authority of the senate or the order of the people’ (Livy, 38, 46).

The real reason for Vulso’s genocidal campaign appears to have been purely racial. The Roman general himself makes this clear in a speech to his troops before the campaign when he outlines the heritage and origin of the Galatians and concludes:

‘these are degenerates, a mongrel race, truly what they are called – Gallograeci. Just as in the case of fruits and cattle, the seed is not so effective in keeping up the strain as the nature of the soil and climate in which they are reared are in changing it’ (Livy 38:17).
Vulso’s speech here illustrates two important factors. Firstly, throughout this speech the ‘Gauls’ are equated with animals and beasts, reflecting the inner psychology of the ‘civilized’ Romans towards these ‘barbarians’. This philosophy seems to have run deep in the Roman psyche at this time for even his opponents, L. Furius Purpurio and L. Aemilius Paulus, express the same idea later before the senate - “Do not suppose, senators, that it is only in their name that the Gallograeci are a mixed race; it is much more their bodies and minds that have become mixed and corrupted” (Livy, 38:46).

GORDIUM

Shortly after the speech to his army, Manlius marched across the river Sangarius, and arrived at the Galatian settlement of Gordium, only to find that it had been abandoned by its inhabitants.

Stone foundations from the Galatian settlement at Gordium.

(after Voigt/Gordion Project; http://www.archaeology.org/0201/etc/celtic.html)
Reconstruction of the Northwest Zone potter’s workshop at Gordium before the Roman campaign. Small pots full of paint and pigments were found on the floor of the building near the doorway, as was a pile of loomweights.


Although the Roman historian Livy informs us that the Romans ‘camped’ at Gordium (Livy 38:18), recent archaeological evidence from the site tells a rather different story. The destruction layer at the Celtic settlement from this period clearly indicates that the market town was subjected to a comprehensive and brutal campaign of destruction, and indicates that the Roman’s intentions against the Galatian population went well beyond military goals.

Whilst the Romans were ‘encamped’ at Gordium, envoys arrived from a Celtic chieftain called Eposognatus, the only one who had not taken up arms against Rome in the recent war, with the news that he had interviewed the Celtic chieftains, but could not make them listen to reason. Meanwhile, the Tolistoboii tribe had begun abandoning their villages and farms in the open country, and together with their wives and children were carrying their portable property and driving their flocks and herds before them towards Mount Olympus, where they intended to defend themselves (Polyb., Hist., XXI, 37: 8; Livy 38,17).
The destruction layer at the Celtic settlement at Gordion left after the Roman ‘victories’ in 189 BC

(After Dandoy et al 2002; see main ‘Galatia’ article)

OLYMPUS

The massacre of the Celtic Tolistoboi (-bogi) tribe at Mount Olympus is described in detail (and with relish) by the Roman historian Livy (Livy 38:19 – 23; see also App. Syr. VII, 42). Of the composition of Vulso’s forces who advanced on Olympus we learn that in front of the legions went the velites, the Cretan archers and slingers as well as the Tralli and Thracians. The heavy infantry advanced slowly as the ground was steep and they held their shields in front of them, to avoid the stones that the Celts threw at them. Meanwhile, the shields of the Galatians, though long, were not broad enough to cover their bodies. Moreover, they had no weapons but their swords, and as they could not come to close quarters these were useless (Livy op cit). They tried to make use of stones, but these were no match for the deadly hail of missiles being rained down on the ‘barbarians’. Livy gleefully describes the scene:
‘On all sides they were being hit by the arrows and leaden bullets and javelins which they were powerless to ward off; blinded by rage and fear they did not see what they were to do, and they found themselves engaged in the kind of fighting for which they were least fitted. In close fighting where they can receive and inflict wounds in turn, their fury stimulates their courage; so when they are being wounded by missiles flung from a distance by an unseen foe and there is no one against whom they can make a blind rush, they dash recklessly against their own comrades like wild beasts that have been speared… So they were lying about everywhere, and some who rushed down on their enemy were being pierced with missiles from all sides; those who got to close quarters the velites slew with their swords. A huge number of missiles was hurled at the crowd herded into the camp, and the shouting, mingled with the lamentations of the women and children, denoted that many were wounded’ (Livy 38: 21-22).

Those who tried to flee were cut down by the Roman cavalry - ‘Then they rode, wherever their horses could travel, after the Gauls dispersed round the mountain, and either killed or took them prisoners.’ (Livy, 38, 23).

As the dust settled on Vulso’s ‘victory’ at Olympus, the scale of the massacre seems to have surprised even the Romans themselves. While both sources agree that 40,000 prisoners were taken (App. Syr. VII, 42; Livy 38:23) the number of dead varies between 10,000 and 40,000. The Roman historian, Livy, informs us that, ‘It was not easy to get at the number of those killed, for the flight and the carnage extended over all the spurs and ravines of the mountain, and a great many losing their way had fallen into the deep recesses below; many, too, were killed in the woods and thickets’ (Livy op cit). Appianus (loc cit) tells us that ‘he had killed so large a number that it was impossible to count them’.

**CHIOMARUS**

Of the fate of the 40,000 men, women, and children captured by the Romans at Olympus, we learn of only one – a Celtic princess called Chiomara (Χιομάρα), wife of the Galatian chieftain Ortiaon. Whereas her husband had apparently escaped the massacre, Chiomara was captured by the Romans. She was subsequently raped by the centurion into whose hands she fell, who afterwards offered to return her to her relatives for a ransom. Plutarch informs us that his greed proved to be the Roman officer’s downfall. He stipulated the amount of gold, and to prevent his men from knowing anything about it, he allowed her to choose one of the prisoners and send a message by him to her friends. A spot by the river was fixed upon where not more than two of her friends were to come with the gold on the following night and receive her. When the ransom was paid, and the Roman ‘was taking an affectionate leave of her’ (Plutarch. The Virtuous Deeds of Women, XXI), Chiomara signaled to one of the Celts, who promptly cut the centurion’s head off.

Escaping to her husband who had found refuge with the Tectosagi tribe near Ancyra, before embracing him, Chiomara threw the Roman’s head at his feet. When she told
him what had happened, Ortiagon said, “Ah! my wife, it is good to keep faith.” “Yes,” Chiomara replied, “but it is better still that only one man who has lain with me should remain alive.” (Polybius op cit; cf. Livy 38:24).

Polybius tells us that he met and conversed with the lady at Sardis, and admired her high spirit and intelligence. However, besides Chiomara, there is no mention of the thousands of others enslaved by the Romans at Olympus, and we may assume that their stories did not have such a ‘happy ending’.

The suicide of a Galatian chieftain after killing his wife

Together with ‘The Dying Gaul’ (below) this work formed part of a monument erected in 227 BC at Pergamon by Attalos I to commemorate his victory over the Celts. The bronze originals were arranged on a large cylindrical plinth in the centre of the square before the temple of Athena Nikephoros

Roman copy in marble (1st c. BC), Roma, Museo Nazionale della Terme
ANCYRA

After his victory over the Tolostobii, Vulso set his sights on the Tectosagi tribe, and the consul commenced his advance against them. In a three days’ march he reached Ancyra, the Galatians being encamped ten miles distant from it (Livy 38:24). In the face of the Roman advance, a desperate defensive action was fought by Celtic warriors in order to give their families time to cross the Halys river, and escape the Roman onslaught. The ‘battle’ near Ancyra appears to have been a rerun of the events at Olympus. Livy (38.27) informs of this heroic Roman ‘victory’:

‘The Gauls, unnerved by the memory of the defeat of the Tolostobogii, exhausted by their long standing and their wounds, with the javelins sticking in their bodies, did not wait for the first charge and battle-shout of the Romans. They fled towards their camp, but few gained the shelter of their entrenchments; the greater number rushed past them right or left, wherewith their eagerness to escape carried them. The victors pursued them up to their camp, slaying them from behind, but once at the camp they stopped in their eagerness for plunder; no one continued the pursuit. The Gauls held their ground somewhat longer on the wings, as it took longer to reach them; they did not, however, wait for the first discharge of missiles. As the consul could not keep his men from looting the camp, he sent the other two divisions in instant pursuit. They followed them up for a considerable distance and killed in all some 8,000 men in the flight; there was no attempt at fighting’.

Although the price had been brutally high, the 8,000 Celts who died at Ancyra had not died in vain, for they had held back the Romans long enough for what remained of the Trocmi and Tectosagi tribes to cross the Halys river, and beyond the murderous reach of Vulso’s legions (loc cit).

THE WAGES OF GENOCIDE

Vulso’s campaign of terror against the Galatians in the summer of 189 BC had left tens of thousands of ‘this degenerate race’ dead or enslaved, and his actions are described as a series of ‘victorious battles’ by Roman and neo-classical historians. For their heroic service there was double pay for his legions, and in his subsequent triumph in Rome Vulso paraded the plunder of his campaign before him - ‘200 golden crowns, each weighing 12 pounds, 220,000 pounds weight of silver, 2103 pounds of gold, 127,000 Attic tetrachmas, 250 cistophori, 16,320 golden coins of Philip’s mintage, and a large quantity of arms and spoils taken from the Gauls, which were carried in wagons. Fifty-two of the enemy leaders were marched before his chariot’. Many of those who followed his chariot had received military rewards, and it was clear from the songs which the soldiers sang that they addressed him as an indulgent general’ (Livy 39:7).
It is true that Vulso was subsequently criticised by members of the Roman senate for his actions in Galatia (Livy 38:46-47). However, he was criticised in Rome, not for the orgy of murder, rape and destruction he had carried out on the Galatian population, but because, according to his opponents, his campaign had not been effective enough …