

Xenophon and his times

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Xenophon, the son of Gryllus, was born in Athens around 428 B.C.E., during the early stages of the Peloponnesian War and near the death of Pericles, and he died at about 354 B.C.E. in Corinth (*Anderson, Xenophon, p.9*). Xenophon belonged to the class of Knights in Athens who were wealthy enough to maintain their own horses and, thus, could participate in the cavalry unit of the Athenian army. This class suffered severely near the end of the Peloponnesian War, because after Sparta invaded Attica it ruined many of their estates and, consequently, it was this class which favored a swift end to this war (*Anderson, p. 42*).

At this time, during Xenophon's youth, Athens was at the peak of her power. The Athenian fleet was the finest in the Aegean Sea area; Athens was economically secure as the treasurer for the Delian League and had used this income in order to build fine public works such as the Parthenon on the Acropolis. Athens was also politically stable and efficient in its democratic process and artistically had just enjoyed an explosive period of government subsidies set aside for artistic works in sculpture and architecture (*Anderson, p.41*). However, in 431 B.C.E. Athens entered into what seemed to be a simple dispute with Sparta, but what would, in fact, turn into a thirty year struggle called the Peloponnesian War. The turning point for Athens was at the death of Pericles in 429 B.C.E. when no one seemed to be able to continue his strong leadership, which eventually relegated the remainder of the fifth century B.C.E.

to a travesty of military blunders and a lavish waste of wealth as an exhausting war of attrition between these two Greek powers for predominance took place (*Thucydides, The Peloponnesian War, pp. 86-87*).

Young men like Xenophon and his contemporaries such as Plato grew up during this period, and it is at this time that many of them developed a great distaste for the Athenian style of democracy. For these two in particular, it had been the folly of democratic government which had led to Athens' ultimate downfall as the predominant cultural and military leader of the Greek world. It had been the quick-tempered sort of hasty decision-making, personified by Athenian politics, which had been behind its delay in beginning the Sicilian Expedition of 415 B.C.E., and this was a prime reason for the turning point in the war when it later became known as the Sicilian disaster of 413 B.C.E. Conversely, it was the careful, cool-headedness of the Spartan style of government which eventually enabled her to outlast Athens and rise to power (*Thucydides, p. 426*).

Thus, Xenophon had grown up during an era of enduring pessimism and national humiliation, where the repeated mistakes of a democratic nation had fatally drained its own vitality and strength and tainted its specter of superiority in the eyes of its youth, ending very quickly a unique age of artistic and cultural prosperity. In his *Hellenika*, written perhaps forty years after the event, Xenophon exemplifies this lavish waste of wealth and manpower with his description of the Battle of Arginusae in 406 B.C.E. Athens lost twenty five ships in this victory over the Spartan fleet, and the Athenian generals tried to rescue the survivors, but were

obstructed by a severe storm which led to the death of thousands of their soldiers (*Xenophon, A History of My Times, pp. 84-85*). Although this was technically an Athenian victory, six of the eight generals were, nevertheless, put to death for their incompetence. Xenophon, an eyewitness to this disgraceful performance of the Athenian assembly, recorded the hasty decisions and lack of fairness in the debate over the generals' fate. He records one of the defenders of the generals, Euryptolemus, who argues the following:

And what reason have you for this excessive haste? What are you frightened of? You are Athenians and Athenians do not act like this. The laws are your own creation and it is the laws, above all, which have made you great. Abide by them and never attempt to do anything without their sanction.

*...Men of Athens, you have won a great and fortunate victory. Do not act as though you were smarting under the ignominy of defeat. (*Xenophon, A History of My Times, pp. 89-91*)*

This comes from Xenophon's personal memory of that debate and probably represents the true words of Euryptolemus. Yet, what one could call the hubris or arrogance of Athens would soon be quelled by its resounding defeat by Sparta at Aegospotami in Asia Minor in 405 B.C.E. Xenophon records the panic which final defeat wrought upon Athens:

As the news of the disaster was told, one man passed it on to another, and a sound of wailing arose and extended

first from Piraeus, then along the Long Walls until it reached the city. That night no one slept. They mourned for the lost, but more still for their own fate. (Xenophon, A History of My Times, p. 104)

Perhaps the Athenians were remembering how merciless they had been to the islanders of Melos years before, whose city they had demolished, whose men they had slaughtered and whose women and children they had sold into slavery (*Thucydides*, p. 408). Now they were at the mercy of Sparta, their mortal enemy, and they feared for the worst. Yet, Sparta was relatively merciful. Although, they demolished the Long Walls of Athens, reduced her navy to that of twelve ships, replaced her democracy with an oligarchy, and occupied the city, the Athenian people were not relegated to the same desperate fate as they had bestowed upon the islanders of Melos (*Xenophon, A History of My Times, p. 107*).

With all these events in recent memory, it was not hard for Xenophon in 401 B.C.E. to accept an invitation from a friend to join an army of Greek mercenaries who were going to fight for Cyrus, the brother of the Persian king (*Xenophon, The Persian Expedition, p. 140*). Ten thousand unemployed Greek soldiers from all over Greece could not refuse this opportunity for adventure and the possibility for fortune. Cyrus was on an expedition to crush a revolt in his Persian province, but this was only a disguise for his real intention of capturing the Persian throne from his brother, Artaxerxes. It is estimated that Xenophon wrote the *Anabasis* almost thirty years after the event, judging from its style and great lack of important detail, but it is crucial in capturing

the thoughts of a transitional generation whose feelings would encompass both the deep-seated tradition of total involvement in one's own *polis* in the fifth century B.C.E. to that of feeling completely disconnected from it by the fourth century B.C.E., establishing the root of the disintegration of the traditional Greek city state by the time of Alexander the Great. The *Anabasis*, which literally means "the journey up", was the first Greek account in geographical detail of the Persian Empire and would later greatly influence Alexander in his exploits in the same area, and was even followed by the Roman emperor Julian almost eight centuries later. Xenophon traces the cause for the *Anabasis* from the uneasy transfer of power from Darius II to his son Artaxerxes, who suspected his brother, Cyrus, of plotting against him. Cyrus, who commanded a province in Persia, quickly amassed his forces and sent messages to the Spartans and to other Greeks, asking them to join him in cleaning up disturbances within his province and promised them many rewards, but had a more ambitious plan in mind (*Xenophon, The Persian Expedition, pp. 55-57*).

Sparta felt a debt toward Persia for its economic aid during the Peloponnesian War and many Spartans responded to Cyrus' entreaties, as well as many other Greeks, including Xenophon. No one knew of Cyrus' intention of marching against the Persian king, for Cyrus knew that this information would immediately have aborted his Greek support. Xenophon joined the Greek army at Sardis in Asia Minor, where they met with Cyrus and his force, and began what they thought would be a short march inland. However, after quelling several tribal disputes within Phrygia, Cyrus led them east beyond his province. The Greeks

did not like this and demanded their promised salaries, but were contented with a bonus for the time being until they went as far as Tarsus in Cilicia, where they rebelled. They suspected Cyrus' true motive and insisted that this was not in their original agreement. Cyrus bribed them on further with higher fortunes if only they would march to the Euphrates River, and it is here that Xenophon describes the Greeks as being wooed by the attraction of riches if Cyrus were victorious over Artaxerxes and of their possible appointments to wealthy satrapies across the Persian Empire (*Xenophon, The Persian Expedition, pp. 65-69*). However, this turned out to be quite premature. As Cyrus marched his army through Babylonia, he was met at Cunaxa by his brother, the king. Although Artaxerxes' army was much larger, the experienced Greek soldiers drove the king back, but this was not enough for Cyrus who hastily charged into the center of battle intent on killing his brother, but only ended up himself being killed with a javelin (*Xenophon, The Persian Expedition, p.86-90*).

The Greeks did not realize until the following day that Cyrus had been killed and had assumed that they had overwhelmingly won the battle. Yet, neither a victory nor even a defeat on their part had much meaning at this point. Cyrus was dead, and the Greeks found themselves leaderless and completely isolated within the heart of the Persian Empire. The next few weeks became a stand-off as Artaxerxes ordered the Greeks to surrender their arms, but they refused. The Spartan general, Clearchus, finally met with the Persian satrap, Tissaphernes, to state that the Greeks only wished to return home peacefully, and it seemed that Tissaphernes wanted nothing less. He invited Clearchus and his top commanders

to a meeting for further discussions, whereupon they were arrested and later killed, while the soldiers accompanying them were immediately slaughtered (*Xenophon, The Persian Expedition, pp.123-129*). Needless to say, the Greek mercenaries were stunned by this turn of events and quickly became despondent. All of a sudden they were without their top generals or even their captains. Now, they thought, they would all have to suffer wretched ends in a strange land, far from home and at the hands of barbarians. Thus, their mood soon deepened into a forlorn sense of misery (*Xenophon, The Persian Expedition, p. 139*).

Yet, for Xenophon, this is really where the most interesting part of the “march of the Ten Thousand” begins, and this is where his fame becomes kindled, for it is Xenophon, by his own recognition, who becomes the leader-savior of the Greek army. While the army is commiserating itself into paralysis, Xenophon receives a vision from Zeus during a dream. When he awakens, he thinks:

*What am I lying here for? The night is passing and at dawn the enemy will probably be here. If we fall into the king's hands, there is nothing to prevent us from seeing the most terrible things happening, from suffering all kinds of tortures and from being put to death in ignominy. (*Xenophon, The Persian Expedition, p. 141*)*

He, then, stood up and gathered all the captains and told them that he was not going to wait to be killed, which would certainly happen if they remained stationary. Then, he said:

...we are physically better able than they are to endure cold and heat and hardship; our morale is, with the gods on our side, better than theirs; and if the gods grant us victory, as they did before, our enemies are easier to wound and kill than we are. (Xenophon, The Persian Expedition, p. 143)

With this bold argument, Xenophon was appointed the new leader of the Greek army.

This is where the legend of the “march of the Ten Thousand” begins. Without any precedent before them for inspiration, or any great knowledge of the geographical area that they were in and without support from Greece, yet with a great sense of forboding, the Greeks began their long march. Xenophon appointed new commanders while they followed the Tigris River north into Armenia and towards the Black Sea. Xenophon describes the Greeks as having to learn new techniques for crossing rivers and of creating new battle formations using their reserve forces, which would later influence Alexander the Great on his own campaigns in the east.

The Greeks were pursued by the Persian army until they entered the Carduchian Mountains, where Xenophon coaxed his troops to keep on marching through the deep snow, so as not to end up freezing to death or being killed by hostile tribes. They marched over seven hundred miles from Cunaxa to Trapezus, which was on the coast of the Black Sea, and although they lost hundreds of men along the way, the survivors cried for joy when they saw the sea from the summit of the mountain, Thekes. They

welcomed their trusted friend, the sea, and the worst of their journey was over. They had escaped certain death and were now free to send for ships to sail away on (*Xenophon, The Persian Expedition, p. 211*)

However, their glory garnered no great admiration for them at the time. They were considered little more than a band of cut-throats for hire by their fellow Greeks at home, for they had gone to help the Persians for profit. Thus, many of them remained in Asia Minor for a few more years, serving other kingdoms until the Spartan king, Agesilaus, took command of the Spartan troops in 396 B.C.E. Xenophon had earned a bad reputation in Athens and was banned from returning there, but he became close friends with Agesilaus (*Anderson, pp. 146-149*). Together they dreamed of a united Greek effort against Persia, much like the one they had had a century earlier, and believed in the sanctity of the aristocracy as the best way to conduct government. Xenophon fought with Agesilaus in Asia and in Greece when the Greek city states revolted against Sparta. He fought with the Spartans against the Athenians and other Greeks at Coronea in 394 B.C.E. and was given favored status and an estate in Sparta at Scillus for a reward.

Here he lived the peaceful life of a landed aristocrat, raising his two sons in the harsh tradition of the Spartan youth. This is where he wrote his first works, but in 371 B.C.E. this all ended with the defeat of Sparta by Thebes at Leuctra. Thus, he lost his estate and fled to Corinth (*Anderson, pp. 162-169*). He returned to Athens for a time, but embraced the spirit of the Peloponnese until his death. His later years were filled with disappointment. He witnessed the Sparta he loved being ravaged by Thebes and

everything that had once been stable and secure become confused and uncertain. Xenophon's *Hellenika* tends to exude a bitter tone throughout its later chapters and is often extremely subjective in its viewpoint. He had not taken the time as Thucydides had in order to be more objective and fair in his representations of historical events, for, at this point in his life, he had become a loyal Spartan in his philosophical outlook. For him, the Thebans are cowards, and he hardly mentions their legendary commanders, Epaminondas and Pelopidas, until the end of his narrative, because it had been they who had been responsible for Sparta's misery. They had freed the *helots* from Spartan bondage and severely diminished its strength, making what had once been a stable environment, chaotic. Those commanders had, essentially, castrated Sparta's power, and Xenophon's punishment for those he hated was clearly not to mention their names in his historical account. He would assign them to oblivion. The depth of his despair culminated in the death of his son, Gryllus, at the Battle of Mantinea in 362 B.C.E. To his credit, he does not name his son when writing of this battle, but his despair is poignantly clear. Greece is in a shambles and, having exhausted itself on useless conflicts, its future is dark. Thus, he concludes his work with the Battle of Mantinea:

...both sides gave back the dead under a truce, as though they had won, and both sides received their dead under a truce, as though they had lost. Both sides claimed the victory, but it cannot be said that with regard to the accession of new territory, or cities, or power either side was any better

off after the battle than before it. In fact, there was even more uncertainty and confusion in Greece after the battle than there had been previously. Let this, then, be the end of my narrative. Someone else, perhaps, will deal with what happened later. (Xenophon, The Persian Expedition, pp. 396-403)

In conclusion, Xenophon has a very concise and clear writing style. He does not embellish his narrative with digressions, but is contented with a single subject or idea at a time. He is very easy to follow and is enjoyable to read. However, from the standard of writing an objective historical work, he pales in comparison with a Thucydides, or the unknown *Oxyrhynchus Historian*. When the fragments of this unknown historian were found in Egypt early in the twentieth century, it was obvious that he was far superior to Xenophon in his detail and objectivity about both the Anabasis and the other events of the early fourth century B.C.E. And so, Xenophon's scholarship was severely debunked by comparison and throughout these particular translations used for this paper, the translators are constantly reminding the reader of crucial events or factors that Xenophon had completely disregarded. At present, Xenophon's works are regarded as memoirs more than they are considered to be dependable histories, but in this sense alone they still achieve a mark of importance in understanding the fourth century B.C.E. Xenophon was more than just a literary scholar who cerebrally pieces together events from a distance and attempts to remain objective, for he was deeply and personally involved

in the events of that turbulent time. He lived through the most disheartening period of Athens' fall from power; he marched with the "Ten Thousand"; he fought for several years with the king of Sparta, and was deeply involved in the affairs of that city state.

In short, Xenophon experienced first hand most of the events he wrote about in the Anabasis and the Hellenika. While personal involvement may have negated his quality as an objective historian, nevertheless, he should not be faulted for supplying a subjective tone in the complicated and frustrating affairs of his generation, for he lived in a time of dramatic upheaval and change, where the old traditions of Greece were giving way to a new path and a new tradition which would culminate in the conquests of Alexander of Macedon later that same century. It would be hard, indeed, for any contemporary historian so inextricably involved in his own times to remain completely detached from his personal feelings about them. Xenophon is vitally important in understanding the affairs of Greece in the fourth century B.C.E. and was a witness and participant in what would be the final stages of Classical Athens as a predominant power in the Mediterranean and Aegean Sea areas. He records Athens' final gasp as a cultural force to be reckoned with as it is overshadowed by the giant from the north, Macedon. To understand the foundation upon which Alexander sets out for Persia, one must understand the power vacuum which resulted from Greece's inner struggles and civil wars a generation before. When Classical Greece had wealth and power, it squandered it on petty struggles for even more power, and it would never have another chance to prove its leadership. Xenophon is important because he represents the older generation

dying out in a time which would never be repeated, for, by the end of his Hellenika, in 362 B.C.E., Greece is exhausted, leaderless and left wide open for an ambitious man like Philip II of Macedon, or his son, Alexander, to provide strong leadership in a bold new direction, while building upon the important traditions that the Classical Greeks bequeathed to them.

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