



2008.10.03

Robin Waterfield, *Xenophon's Retreat: Greece, Persia and the End of the Golden Age*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2006. Pp. xiii, 248. ISBN 978-0-674-02356-7.

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The prolific Robin Waterfield has translated several ancient Greek prose authors, including Herodotus, Plato, and Plutarch. He has also written books of his own on the once wildly popular, nearly unreadable Lebanese poet Kahlil Gibran, and on hypnosis, and a children's fantasy game book.<sup>1</sup> He has produced an accessible history of Athens<sup>2</sup> as well as a translation for the "Oxford World Classics" series of Xenophon's *Anabasis*,<sup>3</sup> or *The March Inland*, a disturbing adventure of many otherwise unemployed Hellenic mercenaries. These fellows chose to enlist under the Persian pretender Cyrus when he attempted to unseat his brother, King Artaxerxes in 401 BCE, after the Peloponnesian War. Waterfield's translation has scholarly notes by Tim Rood, himself the author of a book on a related topic of *Rezeption*.<sup>4</sup> Professional soldiers were a leading export of post-war Greece (80–1), seen by Isocrates (*On the Peace* 44–6), for example, as vagabonds, deserters, and criminal predators—except when he was in his frequent, albeit schizoid, crusader mode.

Waterfield has translated and published many other works of Greek literature, including texts by Euripides<sup>5</sup> and the prolific and creative essayist Xenophon.<sup>6</sup> A somewhat pedestrian writer, the ex-pat Athenian, pro-Spartan Xenophon produced arguably the first proto-novel (didactic, however)—the *Cyropaedia*, proto-biography (moralistic, however)—the *Agesilaus*, and proto-historical sequel (to Thucydides, however unsubtle)—the *Hellenika*. But only the *Anabasis*, with its first eyewitness, "you are there" participant's account of a campaign has won nearly unqualified, even "gee whiz," admiration. This rather disingenuous memoir (aren't they all?) is Xenophon's greatest and most enduring contribution to literature—no apologies necessary. Waterfield here explores a crucial hinge in Western history, before and after the battle of Cunaxa (401 BCE), a moment between the ruinous imperial periods of dominance of Athens and Sparta and the emergence of other cities and other ways to organize fractious inhabitants around the Aegean pond (e.g. Epaminondas' Thebes and several experimental federations). This text necessarily reprises much of Xenophon's original narrative but it also supplies a companion to it, for the reader who can't get

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<sup>1</sup> Respectively, *Prophet: The Life and Times of Kahlil Gibran* (NY: St. Martin's, 1998), *Hidden Depths: The Story of Hypnosis* (London: Macmillan, 2002), and *Steve Jackson and Ian Livingstone Present Rebel Planet* (Harmondsworth: Puffin, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> *Athens: A History, from Ancient Ideal to Modern City* (NY: Basic Books, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> *The Expedition of Cyrus* (Oxford: OUP, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> *The Sea! The Sea!: The Shout of the Ten Thousand in the Modern Imagination* (NY: Overlook Press, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> *Euripides: Orestes and Other Plays* and *Euripides: Herakles and Other Plays* (Oxford: OUP, 2001, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> *Conversations of Socrates*, rev. ed. (NY: Penguin, 1990), *Hiero the Tyrant and Other Treatises* (NY: Penguin, 1998).

enough of the journey from hell. The book throws us *in medias res*, the battle itself, near a village identified only by Plutarch as Cunaxa.

Ten thousand or so unemployed mercenaries, many of them survivors of the long Peloponnesian War (431–404), had no compelling reason not to accept pay to overthrow one foreign, oppressive “barbarian” autocrat and install another. This was Europe’s biggest band of killers-for-pay yet to frighten civilians. After a ray of light appeared at the end of the tunnel near the Tigris, the tunnel caved in on them, or they found out that the light was installed on a powerful Persian engine that ran rapidly over them. Their Pyrrhic victory, well before Pyrrhus’ birth, left the Cyreans in control of the field of battle. Without their commander, however, and their very *raison d’être*, namely Cyrus the foolhardy, the next step became unclear. Young Cyrus had lost his head in the battle and more literally afterwards, along with his hands, to the eunuch Masabates, but the latter later paid dearly for this gruesome, loyal service to his king.

In the aftermath, the stymied Greek generals attended a parley with the Persian enemy’s commanders. They were there summarily arrested as trespassers on the King’s territory, which they truly were. In desperation, the orphaned soldiers elected new commanders, among them a bourgeois Athenian who first pops into the story very modestly, Xenophon. The Hellenes afterwards cajole, lie, rob, and fight their way north and west through mountains in winter and rivers in spate towards what they hope will be friendlier territory. It was a great escape, as long as these desperate thugs were not robbing and pillaging your town. Unpleasant incidents initiated by both sides occurred in all phases of the journey: pre-Cunaxa, while the Greeks pushed on their doomed way to fight for a charismatic but foolhardy prince of the Persian line, one unwilling to remain a mere satrap, his brother’s subordinate. Post-Cunaxa, the Hellenes were trying to extricate themselves from predictably hostile locals and Persia’s armed forces.

Their heartwarming (if you like marauding Greeks), against-all-odds trek through a passel of Persian provinces (Matiene, Armenia, Cappadocia, Phrygia, the Hellespont) inspired both fourth-century pamphleteers, notably the reactionary Athenian crank Isocrates, and generations of imperialists, ancient and modern. The buccaneers’ cry from Mount Theches of “*Thalatta, Thalatta*” warms the heart when we favor the struggling Greek underdogs, but their later brigandage on the south coast of the Black Sea forced even their partisan, quondam *hegemon*, and glorifier, Xenophon, to despair of uniting Greeks for common goals.

Xenophon (ca. 430–350), the adventurous proto-journalist, and the footloose groupie of the professedly apolitical Socrates, both records and exemplifies a retreat from the profound engagement in civic affairs that Pericles had lauded in the famous “Funeral Oration” recorded or invented by Thucydides. The present volume’s Chapter 10 explores that disengagement of the man “who commanded the Cyreans” (Xenophon’s oddly self-effacing anonymous description of himself in his *Hellenika*, the extant history of the Greek world after Thucydides’ text breaks off). Waterfield now covers more ground in fewer pages than Xenophon could, taking readers from the Cyreans’ arrival at their destination, the port of Byzantium, up to the death of Alexander in June 323 at Babylon. Xenophon, after his return to the Balkan peninsula, fought against his natal city in the Corinthian War and therefore became *persona non grata* to his once fellow Athenians.

His person was so *grata* to the Lacedaemonians, however, that they gave him a roomy hunting estate in the territory of their frequent enemies, the Eleians, at Scillus, about two miles from Olympia. Here he built a mini-temple, dedicated to Artemis and not yet identified by topographers. He tells readers that he explicitly modeled it on Ephesus' much grander structure. (This earlier temple is not to be confused with the similarly constructed but later world wonder, built long after the one that Xenophon knew had burned down in 356, set alight by a moronic publicity seeker whose name I know—but with justified spite will not record.) He lived the near-to-Arcadian pastoral lifestyle in the western Peloponnese. Farming, hunting, and writing a variety of works in a kind of archaic and deracinated limbo or fantasyland kept him busy. His wife, Philesia (the name is not provided by Xenophon), some slaves (treated well, compared to Roman or American slaves, in the Jeffersonian manner), and his two sons completed the ménage. Gryllus, one of these sons, died fighting for Athens in a skirmish connected with the indecisive battle of Mantinea in 362. This is the point on the endless historical continuum at which Xenophon breaks off his *Hellenika* narrative, in disgust and probably depression. He did not return to Athens, as he could have; the detachment of exile apparently now suited him fine.

His plain piety, often expressed with some relish for the punishments met by less god-fearing types, was a throwback, perhaps a misunderstanding of Socrates' weird brand of religious devotion. He records, and Waterfield reports (I22), a rare example of an ominous sneeze, an unsurprisingly ignored branch of Greek divination. More amusingly, Xenophon had consulted "his guru" Socrates about joining the Cyrus Scheme to Overthrow the Persian Monarchy. Although told what to ask the Oracle at Delphi, Xenophon asked a different question to forfend an answer that might keep him from signing on. (Greeks knew how to manipulate their divine communications.) Waterfield, like his Attic mentor, holds a dim view of Athenian democracy (50): unsatisfactory legal system, society in which everything and anything was permissible, a rabble-run mode of mischief that undermined the traditions that had made great the violet-crowned city, etc. Perhaps Waterfield has read too much Xenophon. He employs some inexact terminology such as "the Thirty Tyrants," a moniker better reserved for the mid-third century CE of Roman history, not one that the Athenians themselves applied to the post-Peloponnesian War oligarchy of the Thirty.

Waterfield organizes material and writes lucidly (not something one can assume of academics or former academics. In fact, he has taught courses to promote these esoteric skills.) He has intelligent pages (102–11) on the difficult logistics of the expeditionary force and its large baggage train of pack animals and carts as well as camp followers running a market in captured live stock—human and quadruped. He even approaches the difficult and smelly topic of army latrines (III), briefly. In addition, he drove through Iraq in 2004, following as much of the Ten Thousand's route "as geopolitical circumstances and time made feasible" (xiii). That could be many miles or only a few, but few ancient historians have driven much beyond Sart, modern Sardis.<sup>7</sup> Waterfield again reaches the day of the battle and begins the long slog back, around, up and down valleys and mountains, etc. on the way to Hellas (III-2). We live with the unhappy Cyreans for just over a year (March 401—ca. April 400).

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<sup>7</sup> John Prevas recently did, though, and records the story for an even more popular audience in his *Xenophon's March: Into the Lair of the Persian Lion* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 2002).

Waterfield, as noted above, starts with the battle itself, then works backwards and finally forwards from it. No one can point to the unmarked site now called Cunaxa. It lay near the Euphrates, not far north of Babylon (Map A unfortunately shows only the former, Map C only the latter). The Coalition soldiers bivouacking there today are in or near Diyala Province. Waterfield estimates the size of the defending imperial army as 45,000, quite enough to instill a reasonable fear in Cyrus' invaders—who numbered closer to 13,000, when one does the arithmetic. Waterfield reviews what we know of Greek battle tactics to explain hoplite warfare. He credits the Persians' victory to a feint by Tissaphernes, Cyrus' sly rival, the satrap loyal to the long-reigning Shah Artaxerxes II (404-359). One may still appreciate this regional governor's idealized portrait head on a beautiful coin in the British Museum (178). The King of Kings' minions cut off that handsome head when the Spartan King Agesilaus was later playing strategic footsie in Asia Minor with the Persians. As usual, ancient historians inadequately describe (and even here perhaps did not know) how the battle unfolded. Only one side produced a serious account, as far as we know. The Greek physician to the Persian court, Douris of Samos, produced another account, but our unreliable fragments of it help little. Traces of his sensational slant endure in Plutarch's life of *Artaxerxes*, including an unappetizing account of Cyrus' mother destroying her rival, Stateira, her son's mistress and wife. She used a knife smeared on one side with poison during a fancy dinner of bird.

Cyrus the much Younger (only twenty-three at death), became overconfident as his troops advanced, threw himself into the *mêlée*, as ancient commanders often did, but with too few bodyguards, and died for his impetuosity. Terminal for him, but, as the Spartan Clearchus saw, likely to be terminal also for his under- and infrequently paid employees as well. They became trapped deep in an Iraqi quagmire, without air support or any other, to extricate them from the swamps, deserts, hills, and other convenient locales for ambush in inhospitable Mesopotamia and Anatolia. They had to make tough decisions for self-preservation, like abandoning their acquired human booty to starve, freeze, or be captured by even more barbarous Carduchian masters, as they struggled to traverse mountains in winter. They had to slit the throat of one prisoner-guide to ensure the dependability of another. They had to seize a headman's son as a hostage to ensure accurate intelligence in Armenia. Not only is war hell, but so is getting home without a ticket, without a map, without a compass—in the midst of populations that have no reason whatsoever to like or trust you. Xenophon does not whitewash the Ten Thousand's brutal rape of the peoples in their erratic path (see maps; add question marks).

Waterfield then analyzes the peculiar relationship of Greeks and Persians. This began with the Persians' conquest of Lydian Croesus and ended two and one-quarter centuries later with the Macedonian conquest of the Persian Empire. Herodotus attributed virtues, as well as vices, to the Persians and their Achaemenid rulers for 200 years—the previous Cyrus, Dareios, Xerxes, etc. Their Herodotean reputation as “straight shooters” fell with their military fortunes. The Cyreans' limited but real success opened the floodgates of harebrained schemes of Hellenic looting and perhaps conquest. Philip planned and Alexander executed that so-called war of revenge and mercenary dismemberment of a vast, and not particularly onerous, imperial system.

Xenophon was a hero-worshipper. Socrates was the hero of his youth. Cyrus the Rebel, more or less his age-peer, is admired for his gardening, his drinking, his courage as a soldier, and his mental vigor. He was honest, loyal to Greeks, manly, generous, and thoughtful, a real boy scout except that he wanted to depose (probably kill) his elder brother, the King of Persia, who ruled from 404 to 359, a notable feat amidst autocratic intrigues at the Persian courts. That he spoke Greek was another plus for a Hellenic hero-hunter. Agesilaus, the gimpy king of Sparta, replaced the would-be king of Persia as the object of Xenophon's fetishism. The fictionalized elder Cyrus is the heroic focus of his essay on a utopian monarchy, and the list goes on. Waterfield likes Xenophon but appreciates his weaknesses in judgments positive and negative. The *Anabasis* is replete with covert polemic against Xenophon's predecessor commanders and his rivals on the march home: their management styles and skills, their gross tactical errors, their fundamental character flaws. No band of heroes.

Readers will enjoy Waterfield's breezy style and occasional puns, such as his title and this sentence: "They managed to save some of the baggage—including one of Cyrus' concubines, a Milesian woman ..." (19). His erudition and enthusiasm for a difficult trip are impressive, even if he travelled by Land Rover in the present century. He tracked a march in which men walked approximately 3,000 miles, many of them difficult. Waterfield draws deft portraits of Xenophon's fellow leaders. The determined Spartan Clearchus might have been afflicted by PTSD after the Peloponnesian War. Others, such as Xenias and Pasion, earned Xenophon's disapproval: they signed up but soon deserted. (Who got the last laugh on that choice?)

He neatly compares the Cyreans, deprived of their Persian commander, to "a freshly decapitated chicken, poised to skitter aimlessly for a while, haemorrhaging men, before collapsing dead" (112). Waterfield intelligently says of the magnitude of the Cyrean force that: "By sheer chance, the mercenary army was exactly the right size: a smaller force might have been overcome by one of the many opponents they faced; a larger force would have been less mobile, and harder put to find sufficient provisions" (144). The army was a quasi-city on the move, an observation (148) that has antecedents in Nicias' speech to the even more debilitated Athenians trapped in Sicily and in Homer's bivouac before Troy, where the Achaean forces have established a home away from home but run the risk of being pushed into the Aegean Sea and annihilated. Waterfield compares this army to a living organism (162) with all the needs and ills, mental and physical, that the metaphor implies. The Cyreans suffered their worst losses of the expedition when close to home in Bithynia; they had brought retaliation on themselves by their lawless plundering. They alienated nearly every Greek and barbarian community they descended on. If Xenophon had not been one of them, I imagine that he would have found this plague of human locusts entirely reprehensible. Does such real hardship as they had previously suffered make their sometimes unnecessary plundering acceptable? No.

Waterfield, seduced as so many historians are, by the importance of what he has chosen to find important, admits that the writer Xenophon is neither a radical nor a profound philosopher. Indeed, he is more devoted to Greek so-called common sense, and thus Xenophon's Socrates comes across as more a cracker barrel philosopher than the nuanced font of all logic, eristics, aesthetics, and ethics. Xenophon's profound devotion to the

Greek flavor of manly self-control seems “strikingly obvious” (188). No matter, not everyone can be Plato, although I dispute that Xenophon was any kind of philosopher. Or even scholar (197).

More stimulating is Waterfield’s notion that Xenophon was disillusioned three times over. First, the dismal epilogue of disintegration after the most exciting adventure of his life disillusioned him. Second, his admired Spartans’ botch of their internal cohesion and their Aegean mastery disappointed him, occurring so soon after they started to spend the gold which that pinnacle of power presented to them. Third, the fourth-century divisive Greeks’ failure to profit from their futile if fascinating former mistakes soured him. Xenophon was a product of the fifth century; if he distrusted and disbelieved Pericles, he at least imbibed a pre-Socratic form of patriotism that could not delight in the race to the bottom that concluded, after his death, with the self-elevation of the successful brawler and arriviste Phillip II of Macedon.

It puzzled me to read (47) that Socrates was a transitional figure who infected Xenophon. Xenophon allegedly saw his army’s experience as “reflecting a general retreat from the supposed certainties of the fifth century to the relativism of the fourth.” Socrates himself, however, reacted to and attacked the mature relativism of the fifth century associated with Sophists such as Protagoras and Gorgias, so these alleged earlier fifth-century certainties may prove to be paper tigers. Waterfield’s comparison of Xenophon’s narrative to the archetypal journey of the *Odyssey* is another unwelcome stretch (129)—but then everything, even the *Wizard of Oz*, has been compared to the *Odyssey*. (This poor joke turned up serious hits on the World Wide Web.)

A timeline, three maps, footnotes, an immense, carefully annotated bibliography, and an index enrich this engaging study. In addition, twenty-six photographs, many of them snapped by the author, reveal largely unchanged Anatolian landscapes that Xenophon experienced under less favorable circumstances. Other illustrations include images from ancient vases, reliefs, and coins. One welcomes the Greek carved images on Persian-minted coins of the satraps Tissaphernes, Pharnabazos, and Tiribazos—even though the artists idealized their visages. These coins paid Greek mercenaries to kill or frighten other potential rival Greek fighters on Anatolian soil.

I am grateful that Waterfield does *not* claim (197) that Xenophon’s Cunaxa “changed the world for ever.” That overreaching cliché, tedious in itself, might apply to the example set by the Cyreans’ journey. The last chapter discusses the battle’s and the retreat’s “legacy.” Even stolid Xenophon quotes a Greek claiming that the Greeks enjoyed laughing down the Great King (*Anab.* 2.4.4). Another chortled that the women in the Cyreans’ train could have defeated that monarch and his soldiers (6.1.13). Such boasting comes naturally to bitter men. It was a charming surprise to read that nearly a millennium later Eunapius claimed that, “Alexander the Great would never have become ‘Great’ without Xenophon” (211, touting the “philosophers’ interest”). Even a veteran modern historian of antiquity would probably never have noted that compliment, or relevant Xenophontine references buried in the poetry of Louis MacNeice and the prose of Italo Calvino. Xenophon’s literary achievement preserved the vagabonding Greeks’ achievement of survival. Further, it made dubious claims of Panhellenic aggression sound more defensible, even morally edifying.

This book of popular history (in a most positive sense of that word) achieves its aims: to explore aspects of the battle and the nearly three-thousand-mile journey that Xenophon does not describe, to provide an historical context for the expedition itself, and to evaluate its ancient author. Less successful, perhaps because less fully argued and inadequately illustrated, is the forced analogy between the “before and after” for this semi-organized, semi-anarchic clutch of men. Waterfield also presses too far the contrast between the deep values of the optimistic fifth-century and the shallow materialism of the cynical fourth (see, e.g., xii).

Xenophon’s character (in two senses of the word), both self-effacing and eager to show readers how effective and popular this bourgeois had become among mutinous roughnecks, comes through better in the *Anabasis* than in any other text. In the fierce snow and cold of an endlessly repeated bivouac somewhere in Anatolia, on a winter morning, with frostbite, hunger, and snow blindness afflicting the troops, Xenophon emerges. Naked/in his underwear (so he says! Translators of *gymnos* prefer “lightly clad”), Xenophon (says Xenophon) “bravely rose and began to chop firewood with his ax. Others took over from him...” (*Anab.* 4.4). Alternately astute and cunning, Xenophon surmounts every obstacle to the admiration of his and others’ infantry companies. His grizzled men were the product of a crisis, an aberration of aggregation, not an enduring cross-section of ancient Greek manhood.