

Greek gang leader with just the right connections

The Long March. June 10, 2005 *Times Higher Education Supplement*

The Long March: Xenophon and the Ten Thousand by Robin Lane Fox ed.
Publisher - [Yale University](#) Press. Pages – 351. Price - £25.00. ISBN - 0 300 10403 0

Warfare was a fact of everyday life for citizens of the ancient Greek *poleis*. As Michael Whitby hints in his contribution to *The Long March: Xenophon and the Ten Thousand*, edited by Robin Lane Fox, the familiarity of warfare might explain the fact that the first real memoir of life on a military campaign was not written until well after the great 5th-century wars that inspired the formal histories of Herodotus and Thucydides. Why write about the hardships and drudgery of army life when everybody knows about them and would just as soon forget them?

The 12 essays in *The Long March* do a good job of exploring why and how the first military memoir, Xenophon's *Anabasis*, was written and why it has kept its hold on readers as varied in tastes and experiences as Alexander the Great, Mark Antony, Samuel Johnson, Lord Byron, Tolstoy and Louis MacNiece. Lane Fox reminds us that the 1979 Hollywood "punk gang" movie *The Warriors* is now the "best-known legacy" of the march of the Ten Thousand, accurately translating the rough ethics of Xenophon's Greek mercenaries and their leaders to the present day.

Any scepticism a reader might have about Lane Fox's claim is swept away by Thomas Braun's negative analysis, filtered through his deep appreciation of modern German history, of the nature, motives and actions of the two principal leaders described favourably by Xenophon, the Persian Cyrus and the Spartan Clearchus. Braun refreshingly does not shy away from discussing "goodness" and "badness" of character and deeds, albeit in relative Greek terms. Cyrus, in Xenophon's account, had a reputation for truthfulness. But Braun convinces us that Cyrus was cynically following the medieval Persian advice to cultivate such a reputation because "(Y)ou will find it useful when you have to tell lies."

Xenophon wrote the *Anabasis* most likely at least 30 years after his first-hand experiences. He gives us his version of the two-year expedition (spring 401-spring 399BC) of the Ten Thousand. These were Greek mercenary soldiers, mainly infantry men drawn from different areas of the Greek world, initially in the service of Cyrus, brother of the new Persian King Artaxerxes and at the time a satrap, or governor, in western provinces of the Persian empire.

According to Xenophon, Cyrus recruited these soldiers under false pretenses. He eventually took them from western Turkey into the heart of modern-day Iraq in an attempt to overthrow his brother. This is the true *anabasis*, or inland march, part of Xenophon's account.

Cyrus failed in his purpose. He was killed at the Battle of Cunaxa. The rest of the *Anabasis* follows the Greek force as they march and fight and pillage their way north over forbidding terrain and through hostile regions to the eastern Black Sea and eventually into European Thrace and back to the Aegean.

Xenophon's long chronological remove from the original events and the extreme hardships of his adventures during these two years have raised serious questions about how the *Anabasis* was composed. The two schools of thought are well represented here in the chapters by George Cawkwell and P.J. Stylianou. Cawkwell argues from unexpected and unmotivated omissions that Xenophon kept no contemporary diary and was writing from memory, doing the ancient equivalent of Googling sources on Persian imperial geography and history to fill in factual details such as names of personages, distances and the dimensions of topographical landmarks. Stylianou, convincingly in our opinion, argues that Xenophon kept a journal. Stylianou cites historical parallels for diaries being kept under the most dangerous and difficult circumstances, for example by Captain Bligh for 48 days over 4,000 miles of ocean in a "small, cramped, open boat".

The *Anabasis* presents then all the problems associated with war stories and political memoirs. As Bill Broyles remarks: "Every good war story is, in at least some of its crucial elements, false. The better the war story, the less of it is likely to be true. Robert Graves wrote that his main legacy from the First World War was a difficulty in telling the truth!" Add Xenophon's need to offer self-defensive spin for his involvement in and ultimate profit from this perilous adventure and we can understand why there has been a mini-renaissance in scholarship on Xenophon and the *Anabasis* in the past 30 years. Xenophon is metaphorically both an urban gang leader and a retired statesman worried about his place in history.

V.Azoulay helps us understand Xenophon's rhetorical strategies. As a conservative aristocrat, Xenophon was sensitive to two kinds of accusation. The surviving rank and file of the Ten Thousand protested that he had profiteered by "manipulat(ing) the army in order to receive gifts" from the Thracian Prince Seuthes late in the expedition when the Ten Thousand were operating in what is modern-day Bulgaria. Meanwhile, the old boys in Xenophon's club felt he had violated the aristocratic code by serving for payment - what the Greeks called *misthos* - as a mercenary soldier first under Cyrus and then under Seuthes. Azoulay ably shows how Xenophon attempts to extricate himself from these charges by employing dubious, if not rhetorically mendacious, arguments.

Xenophon presents himself as an incorruptible aristocrat who gained wealth by honourable means. He does not introduce himself until the third book of the *Anabasis* - and then in the third person. A certain Athenian named Xenophon, he writes, accompanied the expedition "neither as a general, nor as a company commander, nor as a common soldier". Rather, he was there at the invitation of his Boeotian oligarchic friend Proxenos, who thought Cyrus was the right kind of person for the right kind of person to meet.

Only later, after the generals of the heterogeneous mercenary force were assassinated through Persian treachery, does Xenophon move forward into a command position. He was then never a mercenary. He accompanied the expedition at the outset as a mildly interested observer with the right connections and acted later out of noblesse oblige.

Some scholars are uncomfortable with this view of Xenophon as a kind of Richard Nixon, decades after Watergate, rehabilitating himself by writing *Beyond Peace*. They argue that Xenophon wrote the *Anabasis* because he wished to encourage the Greeks to attack Persia by

appealing to the Panhellenism that was in the air by the second quarter of the 4th century, citing Xenophon's so-called Panhellenic speeches as evidence. Tim Rood, however, convincingly argues here that these speeches are not Panhellenic at all when they are read in the context of Xenophon's narrative, but "can easily be read as stressing the difficulty of such an expedition rather than its feasibility".

Several essays in *The Long March* use the *Anabasis* as a source of data for historical practices. Simon Hornblower argues that the democratic procedures of Xenophon's ethnically mixed force in distant hostile surroundings reflected a not-unparalleled positive feature of Greek *polis* armies. Robert Parker offers an urbane critique of Xenophon's pragmatic religious attitudes, not only derived from rituals on the march, but well suited to military necessity. Xenophon's gods, in Parker's view, are "reasonable if slightly remote figures with whom one can do business, rather like the better sort of Spartan".

It is fitting, then, that Xenophon used a tithe of the profits from the sale of captives taken in the Ten Thousand's many raids and battles to establish a sanctuary of Ephesian Artemis on his estate at Skillous near Olympia. The sanctuary was doubtless visited only by the better sort of worshippers.

Tom Palaima is professor of classics and John Friend a graduate student in ancient history, [University of Texas at Austin](http://www.utexas.edu/cola/departmentsof/classics/faculty/palaima.html), US.