

Admiring Others: Xenophon and Persians

I want to begin this chapter with one of my favourite passages from the Xenophontic corpus. The book is the *Hellenica* which was a historical text, and it is late winter 394 BC. Agesilaus, the Spartan king, had launched a panhellenic campaign against the Persian empire in 396 (whose distinctly Homeric overtones were established by the Spartan's attempt to sacrifice at Aulis before setting out). He had considerable success in Phrygia, which led to hopes of encouraging some of the local satraps to revolt from the Persian King. With this in mind, Agesilaus arranged to meet with the satrap of Phrygia, Pharnabazus, through a common friend, Apollophanes of Cyzicus. When Pharnabazus and Apollophanes reached the place agreed for the meeting, Xenophon says:

There Agesilaus and the Thirty of his retinue were waiting, lying on the ground on a patch of grass. Pharnabazus came wearing a robe worth much gold. His servants laid out for him carpets, on which Persians sit at ease (*malakōs*), but Pharnabazus was ashamed of the luxury, seeing the simplicity of Agesilaus. So he himself also reclined on the ground as Agesilaus did (*Hell.* 4.1.30).

In this vignette, Xenophon contrasts Spartan simplicity with the Persian ostentation. The comparison belonged to a discourse of Greek poverty and Asian wealth:¹ in the sixth century, Xenophanes of Colophon wrote with resentment of Lydian *habrosynē*, luxury, which he linked to tyranny (fr. 3), in the fifth century Aeschylus' Agamemnon was transformed into an Asian potentate as he walked to his bath and his death along tapestried carpets (*Agam.* 905-57), and in the fourth century Isocrates argued that Persian wealth had made even the best of

¹ Mitchell 2007, 21-3.

them weak (*Paneg.* 150-1), and that the riches of Asia were there for the taking (*Paneg.* 4.182). Yet, however desirable it may sometimes have seemed, Asian wealth and soft-living were associated with slavery and weakness, and formed an important part of the discourse of Otherness which defined Greek identity.

Xenophon's Pharnabazus fits this model. Agesilaus' strength is emphasised by his simplicity, and the Persian's carpets and beautiful and expensive clothing suggest his life of effeminacy and slavishness. But this Persian is neither effeminate nor slavish. Rather he shows his true nobility. He is ashamed of his luxury. He does not invite Agesilaus to join him in his ease, but realises that the Spartan king is the more powerful of the two because he does not need ostentation to show his position, and so Pharnabazus symbolically lays aside his wealth and joins the Spartan king sitting on the ground. Agesilaus may have taken up his position naturally, but Pharnabazus knowingly joins him.

In Greek thought the Persians were often portrayed as the natural enemy, 'the Other' against which the Greeks defined themselves. Furthermore, one strategy for realising Greek unity (which in reality was difficult to achieve) was imagined to be a common war directed against the Persian empire. Xenophon, in his writings, has often been understood as panhellenist, that is as a proponent of this war against the barbarian who, despite his admiration for the younger Cyrus and perhaps also Cyrus the elder, regarded the Persians as weak and enslaved, and ripe for conquering. In this paper, on the other hand, I wish to argue that Xenophon had a rather more complicated view of Persians, indeed of all men. While Xenophon consciously and ironically constructed his narrative within the panhellenist frameworks which formed such an important part in Greek thought in the fourth century,² he believed that all men had the opportunity for nobility according to the choices they made.

² In saying that Xenophon wrote 'ironically' I do not mean this in the extreme sense adopted by 'Straussians', but in a much more gentle and uncomplicated way. Note Vivienne Gray's

In the first section of this paper, we will consider Xenophon's response to panhellenism. We will then look at in more detail Xenophon's attitudes to some Persian leaders, before turning to Xenophon's awareness of the dangers for all men of Asian wealth, and his own project for a meritocracy of the best men, no matter what their cultural background.

1. Xenophon and panhellenism

The idea that the Greeks should unite to fight a war against the barbarian crystallised in the aftermath of the Persian Wars at the beginning of the fifth century. Probably written for the victory celebrations at Plataea after the repulse of the Persians, the poet Simonides wrote an elegy which may suggest that the Greeks (and predominantly Spartans) should march forth like (or even, metaphorically, with) Homeric heroes against Asia. In this way, the idea of a cycle of 'heroic' wars developed, of which both the Trojan and Persian Wars were a part. This panhellenist discourse of a continuous cycle of wars against the barbarian became an important element in Greek self-definition, so that by the fourth century the Persians were considered the natural enemy, and the war was a sacred war. The fourth-century Isocrates says: 'This war alone is better than peace, being more like a sacred venture (*theōria*) than a military campaign, and brings advantages for both those who want to live quietly and those who are eager for warfare' (*Paneg.* 181). A significant strand of this discourse, which can be traced through Aristophanes, Herodotus and the medical writers was that the barbarians of Asia were weak and effeminate (either as a result of their climate, their political constitutions or their lifestyle), and that therefore Asia was ripe for conquest (cf. Isocrates, *Phil.* 139).³

attack on Straussian readings of Xenophon, but she also goes too far the other way in denying the possibility of any ironic readings at all: Gray 2011.

³ Mitchell 1997, 130-2.

In the past it has often been argued that Xenophon is a panhellenist who, like Isocrates and others in the fourth century, saw war against the ‘Persian’ barbarian as a means to political unity. It is certainly the case the Xenophon is aware of these panhellenist themes. In the *Anabasis* Xenophon picks up the importance of climate for manly courage, and reports a speech in which he exhorts the Greek mercenary army to remember that the very bodies of the Greeks are better at bearing cold, heat and hard work than those of their enemies (3.1.23). Likewise, in the *Agesilaus* he compares the Spartan king to the ‘quackery’ (*alazoneia*) of the Persian king (9.1). On this basis George Cawkwell, for example, has argued that Xenophon’s friendship with Agesilaus was built on their mutual interest in a panhellenist war against the barbarian,⁴ and that Xenophon was only interested in the Spartan nauarch Callicratidas because of his panhellenist zeal.⁵ Likewise, Dillery argues that the *Anabasis* is a panhellenic text which emphasises the freedom of the Greeks and the subservience of the Persians, and so represents the Persians ‘as morally and therefore militarily inferior.’⁶ It is pointed out that in the *Anabasis* even Cyrus, the Persian prince, declares to his Greek mercenary army, that he thinks Greeks are better and stronger than the barbarians, because they are worthy of freedom (1.7.3). Hirsch, on the other hand, is sceptical of Xenophon’s purported panhellenism, and thinks that Xenophon’s *Agesilaus*, so far from being a panhellenist text, is an apology for the apparent shortcomings of the Spartan king.⁷ Rood, in a similar vein, has shown that speeches such as Cyrus’ have their own narrative purposes, and do not necessarily indicate that Xenophon is the anti-Persian panhellenist he is sometimes represented as being. Indeed, he

⁴Cawkwell 1979, 39-41; id. 1976, 65.

⁵ Cawkwell 1975, 63-4. See also Moles 1994, 76 n. 31, who also thinks that panhellenism plays some part in Xenophon’s thought.

⁶ Dillery 1995, 60.

⁷ Hirsch 1985, 39-60.

observes, ‘All that Cyrus’ commonplace contrast between disciplined Greeks and unruly barbarian hordes shows is that he has judged his audience well,’ and argues that the *Anabasis* is a complex text which essentially meets Xenophon’s needs of self-representation as a leader, and also offers ethical and didactic analyses of leadership itself.⁸

2. Noble Persians and Greek lotus-eaters

In fact, there is another strand in Xenophon’s thought which clearly expresses admiration for Persians, or at least particular Persians. While Tissaphernes is represented as the arch-betrayer both by the duplicitous seizing of the mercenary generals (*Anab.* esp. 2.5.1-6.1) and by breaking his oath to Agesilaus (*Ages.* 1.12), other Persians, notably Cyrus (the Elder) of the *Cyropaedia* and Cyrus the Younger of the *Anabasis* are treated, at least apparently, with great honour.

Xenophon says that the Cyrus of the *Cyropaedia* is the best example of a man ruling over men through willing obedience (e.g., 1.1.3). Cyrus shows many Greek virtues, and especially justice, moderation and foresight (*dikaiosynē*, *sophrosynē* and *phronesis*: *Cyrop.* 1.2.6-8, 6.21-2). He achieved excellence through constant training and practice (e.g., *Cyrop.* 8.1.39), and never sliding into complacency despite success (*Cyrop.* 7.5.75-6; cf. *Mem.* 3.5.13), and was also restrained and compassionate in his dealing with others, shown most clearly through the care he takes of the ‘all-divine’ Panthea, the most beautiful women in Asia (*Cyrop.* 4.6.11), who is allotted Cyrus as booty but whom he keeps safe for her husband (*Cyrop.* 5.1.2-17; cf. 6.1.34, 45-9). He is so successful at acquiring willing obedience that it is claimed he was born a ‘king by nature’ (*basileus ... su physei pephukenai*), like the leader of the bees in a bee-hive, and that those he leads have a ‘terrible passion’ (*deinos erōs*) to be ruled by him no less than bees wish to obey the leader of the hive (*Cyrop.* 5.1.24-5).

⁸ Rood 2004, 310.

Cyrus the Younger is equally worthy of praise. In the *Anabasis*, after he dies in battle, Xenophon says of him that he was the most ‘royal’ (*basilikōtatos*) of the Persians, and the most worthy of ruling after Cyrus the Elder (1.9.1). As a boy he was the most modest (*aidēmonestatos*) of his companions, and more obedient to his elders than those of inferior rank (1.9.5). When he made a treaty or swore an oath, he thought it was of the first importance not to break his word (1.9.7). He strove to outdo others in repaying either benefactions or harm (1.9.11), and he showered particular honours on those who were brave in war (1.9.14). So loved was he that one of his attendants died defending his body (1.8.28-9).

Nevertheless, both these texts have been read ironically. Braun has argued in relation to the *Anabasis* that it is more important what Xenophon does not say about Cyrus than what he does.⁹ In particular, Braun points to the fact that although Cyrus is given many Greek virtues, he is not ascribed the most cardinal virtue of all, *sōphrosynē*, that he deceives the Greeks into following him, that he is an attempted fratricide, and that he is a poor commander who dies in battle.

Likewise, Carlier argues that the Cyrus of the *Cyropaedia* should be read as a Greek king in Persian clothing, and that his war should be understood as a panhellenist one.¹⁰ However, rather than suggesting that Xenophon is advocating such a war, Carlier argues that Xenophon is offering a subtle warning about empire and absolute monarchy, since after Cyrus’ takes Babylon we see his rule apparently become corrupted (he shuts himself away, adopts the practice of *proskynesis* and takes to wearing make-up and platform shoes to make himself look more impressive: 7.5.37-57, 8.1.40-1, 3.14). On his death, the empire falls into decline because Cyrus’ successors were seduced by Medish garments and Medish luxury (*habrotēs*) into Medish softness (*malakia*) (*Cyropaedia* 8.8.15).

⁹ Braun 2004.

¹⁰ Carlier 2010.

Others have also noticed Xenophon's less positive attitude to Cyrus in the post-Babylonian period. Gera, for example, concludes that Cyrus has become a benevolent despot because that is what is needed for ruling an empire.¹¹ Nadon, on the other hand, argues that Xenophon (who, for Nadon, is interested in studying the best kind of constitution) uses the discrepancies between his representation of the pre-and post-Babylon Cyrus to show (although not uncritically) that Republic rather than Empire is the best form of rule for achieving the common life of virtue.¹² Yet again, Azoulay has suggested that in capturing Babylon we can explain Cyrus' change in behaviour because he was doing something new, and that as a result new rules needed to apply.¹³ However, Carlier must surely be right about the essential irony of Xenophon's Cyrus whose absolute monarchy (as 'seeing law', *blepōn nomos*: *Cyropaedia* 8.1.23) stands outside all that Xenophon elsewhere values in rule under law. In contrast to Cyrus, Agesilaus, in particular, chooses to go back to Sparta and be ruled by law and the will of the ephors rather than to stay in Asia and be the greatest man (*Ages.* 2.16; cf. 1.36).

Nevertheless, Tuplin thinks that the Cyrus of the *Cyropaedia* must be understood as recognizably Persian and that Xenophon is making a point about the nobility of the Persians as a worthy foe.¹⁴ And it is important that both Cyrus the Elder and Cyrus the Younger have an essential nobility, even if that becomes compromised in one way or another. That it was luxury that brought the Persians down is, as we have seen, a *topos* of long-standing.

¹¹ Gera 1993, 285-99.

¹² Nadon 2001, esp. 161-80.

¹³ Azoulay (2004) argues that Xenophon is making the point that the successful leader of an empire (as opposed to a republic) must change his behaviour and adopt a more 'Median' style.

¹⁴ Tuplin 2013.

Herodotus, in his strange and ironic ending to the *Histories* has Cyrus the elder warn against a campaign against the fertile lands of Greece, because, he says, soft lands breed soft men, and that instead of rulers they would become the ruled (9.122). Likewise, Plato in the *Laws* associates the decline of the Persian monarchy with the fact that the royal children were educated by women, and was characterised by luxuries (*truphē*) and lack of restraint (*anepiplēxia*) (694c-695e).

However, for Xenophon it was not only Persians that could be corrupted by wealth and luxury. In the *Anabasis*, Xenophon makes a speech to hearten the mercenary army, but warns them against the dangers of the land they are in and any thought of staying:

For I am afraid (he says) lest we should all learn to live a life of idleness and plenty, and to make company with the beautiful and tall women and girls of the Medes and Persians, and like the lotus-eaters forget the road home (3.2.25).

Some have seen this passage as panhellenic, on the grounds that the panhellenic project is completed in the colonisation of Asian land. However, even Dillery, who otherwise believes in the panhellenism of the *Anabasis*, has recognised that this passage presents a warning to *Greeks* of the dangers of Asia especially about the beauty of Asian women.¹⁵ It is not just Persians that can be corrupted by luxury and things that are too good, but Greeks can also. It is for them to choose to leave behind the soft life that might entice them, just as Herodotus' Cyrus had already advised resistance to a life of comfort and ease. It is perhaps notable that while Cyrus was able to resist the beautiful Panthea he did succumb to the orientalist tropes

¹⁵ J. Dillery, *Xenophon and the History of my Times*, London and New York, 1995, 62; cf. T. Rood, 'Panhellenism and self-presentation: Xenophon's speeches', in R. Lane Fox (ed.), *The Long March. Xenophon and the Ten Thousand*, New Haven and London, 2004, 316.

of seclusion, obeisance and illusions of grandeur. The weakness and effeminacy which may have resulted from such oriental lifestyles were not ethnic characteristics. They were a matter of choice.

3. Admiring others: Xenophon's meritocracy

In fact, Xenophon seems to imagine that in his ideal society the best people can be drawn from any community. In the *Cyropaedia*, Cyrus' constitution is a meritocracy where the best people are given the highest rewards, and the lazy and wicked must be weeded out (*Cyrop.* 2.2.22-5). Cyrus rejects completely the democratic notion that all should have the same rewards (*Cyrop.* 2.2.18-21, 2.3.4; cf. 5-16), and transforms his army from one based on an elite of equals, the *isotimoi*, and a 'common' mercenary contingent, into one based on 'nobility', which is defined by the pursuit of excellence. As a result, Cyrus creates a system of hierarchies (*Cyrop.* 8.1.4), over which the king, as necessarily the best man, presides as ruler (*Cyrop.* 1.6.22, 7.5.78-83). In this Xenophon seems to have been engaging in a debate about equality and political forms which began in the fifth century but continued into the fourth.¹⁶ However, Cyrus' army contains not only Persians and Medes, but also anyone who buys into Xenophon's system of values. Despite Carlier's warnings that Cyrus does not have a vision for the unity of mankind, as Tarn has seen for Alexander of Macedon,¹⁷ his innermost circle were defined by excellence irrespective of social class or nationality, and included not only Pheraulas, a *dēmotēs*, but also Tigranes the Armenian, Abradatas king of Susa and husband of Panthea, and Gadatas. When Cyrus was proposing the reorganisation of the army, he exhorted his generals:

¹⁶ Mitchell 2013, esp. ch. 5.

¹⁷ Carlier 2010, 350.

Do not think that you should fill up the ranks from the citizens, but just as in selecting horses you would seek those who are best not just those who are home grown, so also take them from among all men whoever would seem to you to contribute most to your strength and your honour (*Cyrop.* 2.2.28).

Similarly, when Cyrus the younger was putting together his army, he was looking for the best men, and so assembled the Greek mercenaries.

As he works through the characters of Cyrus the Elder and Cyrus the Younger, Xenophon develops an ironic edge because of the choices they made not to live up to the standards they had set for themselves. On this level, they choose to let themselves down, as Cyrus the Elder wears platform shoes and hires spies to tell on the traitors in his empire, and Cyrus the Younger dies quickly and ignominiously because of impetuosity before the battle has barely begun. However, they are still admirable. Cyrus the Elder knew how to rule men (even if finally he forgot some of his own rules), and Cyrus the Younger was the most royal and most worthy of the Persians to rule. They were noble barbarians, although they finally failed to rise above the choices that their cultures allowed them to make.

In the story from the *Hellenica* with which we started Pharnabazus too was a noble barbarian. He chose, at least for a time, to set aside the luxury of carpets and cushions and to sit with Agesilaus on the grass. In a speech which is both Homeric and anti-Homeric, Agesilaus invites him to become his friend, and to join him, no longer to have a master, and so to be free (*Hell.* 4.1.35-6). Pharnabazus, however, makes his choice and declines, deciding instead to take up the command of the King's armies (*Hell.* 4.1.37). 'Agesilaus then took his hand, and said: "O noblest of men, would that I had such a friend as you" ' (*Hell.* 4.1.38).

Xenophon uses the panhellenic discourse of luxury and decadence to frame his account of the relationships between Greeks and Persians, and he thinks that the Persians

have made wrong choices which led them to decline. Nevertheless, he was aware that they were still noble enemies, and that the choice of the beauty and richness of Asia was a peril to which Greeks could easily choose to succumb. Yet he still thinks the right choice is for Greek values. In this sense Xenophon affirms Greek cultural norms, and protreptically urges their importance. However, what he seems to dream of is a world in which the best men rule, whoever they are, whether Greek or barbarian, united in the pursuit of excellence. This vision is conservative in that it calls for a return to the world of heroes, and the rule of the elite.¹⁸ Yet it is also radical and subversive in that it breaks the boundaries not just between the classes, but also Greeks and the Other, and, running against the grain of fourth-century panhellenism, questions what the terms of those boundaries might be.

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