

## Xenophon's *Anabasis* and the Origins of Military Autobiography

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In the fourth century BC, Xenophon, a wealthy, aristocratic Athenian and sometime associate of the philosopher Socrates, wrote the first soldier's memoir in world literature: the *Anabasis*.<sup>1</sup>

The *Anabasis* is a prose account, written in the third person, some ten thousand words long. In it Xenophon tells the story of the Cyreans, mercenaries recruited by the Achaemenid prince Cyrus for his abortive attempt to usurp the throne of the Persian empire. The text begins rather abruptly in 402 BC with the immediate background to Cyrus' expedition. From there Xenophon traces the march of Cyrus and his troops toward the Persian capital of Babylon, recounts Cyrus's death at the battle of Cunaxa in 401, and follows the Cyreans as they make an arduous escape north from Mesopotamia to the Black Sea. The account ends, even more abruptly than it began, with the surviving mercenaries joining a Spartan army in March 399. Along with a detailed, day-by-day narrative of the Cyrean march, Xenophon includes speeches in direct address, ethnographic and geographic observations, and tactical advice. Unique among ancient Greek authors, he records the experiences and reactions of common soldiers at war. Indeed, the *Anabasis* has been called "the only work that throws light upon the facts of military life" in classical Greece.<sup>2</sup> For these reasons, the *Anabasis* is today read most often by scholars of ancient history, who find in it invaluable information on Greek warfare, politics, and culture in the fifth and fourth centuries BC.

This essay, however, is not written from a historical point of view but rather takes a different, more literary approach to the *Anabasis*. It begins by looking at when and why Xenophon composed the *Anabasis*. Then it employs perspectives from Samuel Hynes's work on personal narratives of

war to find what, if anything, Xenophon finds in common with modern writers of the soldiers' tale. Finally, Xenophon's influence on subsequent military life writing merits recognition as the progenitor of the military autobiographical tradition.

## Historical Background

Greece at the end of the fifth century BC was an unsettled, uncertain place, its *poleis* (city-states) still sorting through the aftermath of the agonizing Peloponnesian War (431–404). The once-mighty Athenians, shorn of their maritime empire, had seen their city walls demolished to the music of flute girls. For a time even Athens's famed democracy had disappeared, replaced by a murderous aristocratic junta. The victorious Spartans faced challenges of their own. Wartime allies and former Athenian subjects chafed under Sparta's overbearing hegemony; while Sparta had gone to war under the banner of Greek freedom it now began to seem a tyrant. And across the Aegean Sea loomed the immensity of Achaemenid Persia, chastened by the Greeks at the battles of Marathon and Salamis nearly a century before but still the mightiest empire the world had yet known.

In the years following the Peloponnesian War, thousands of Greeks sought escape from the economic and political difficulties of their homeland by taking up arms for perhaps the most unexpected of paymasters: the Persians. Mercenary service was nothing new to the Mediterranean—already in the early seventh century BC Greek soldiers of fortune in Egypt were chopping graffiti into pharaohs' basalt statues—but by the end of the fifth century unprecedented numbers of Greeks had entered Persian employment.<sup>3</sup> Many became garrison troops for the Persian-controlled Greek cities of Ionia, in western Asia Minor. It would have raised no eyebrows, therefore, when in late 402 BC a twenty-three-year-old Persian prince named Cyrus dispatched orders to his Ionian garrison commanders instructing them to “enlist as many . . . soldiers of the best sort as they could” (*Anab.* 1.1.6).<sup>4</sup> Unbeknown to his commanders, however, the prince was plotting to usurp the throne of his older brother Artaxerxes II, great king of Achaemenid Persia.<sup>5</sup> Having gathered some twelve thousand mercenary foot soldiers along with an uncertain number of Persian levies, Cyrus set out in March 401 from his provincial capital of Sardis (modern Sart, in western Turkey). The young prince at first proffered a succession of flimsy pretexts for the expedition, but as his force marched across Anatolia and into the heart of Mesopotamia, the mercenaries finally discovered Cyrus's true purpose. A few deserted, but for the majority it was too late to back out.

In September the armies of Cyrus and Artaxerxes met near Cunaxa, a hamlet just north of Babylon. Cyrus's heavily armed mercenaries won him the battle, but the prince himself was killed in the fighting. His native troops quickly fled or switched their loyalties to Artaxerxes, leaving the mercenaries stranded in unfamiliar and hostile territory. Their commanders attempted to negotiate a way out of the predicament but were lured into Artaxerxes' camp under a deceptive truce and then massacred. Rather than surrendering or dispersing after this calamity, however, the former mercenaries chose new leaders from their ranks and embarked on an arduous trek out of Persian territory. Unable to return the way they came, the troops slogged north up the Tigris valley, then across the rugged mountains of what is today eastern Turkey, finally reaching the Black Sea at Trapezus (Trabzon) in February 400. From there they marched west along the water, plundering coastal settlements as they went. Arriving at Byzantium (Istanbul) that October, the soldiers then spent the winter as employees of the dynast Seuthes in European Thrace.

Finally, in March 399 the survivors were incorporated into a Spartan army assembling in western Asia Minor under the general Thibron. In two years of marching and fighting, the Cyreans had covered some two thousand miles—a journey roughly equivalent to walking from Los Angeles, California, to Chicago, Illinois.<sup>6</sup> Of the twelve thousand Cyreans who set out from Sardis in March 401, approximately six thousand remained under arms in March 399. At least a thousand had deserted along the way; the others had succumbed to wounds, frostbite, hunger, or disease.

### Xenophon's Life and Works

Xenophon the son of Gryllus was born about 427 BC into a wealthy, aristocratic family from the deme (district) of Erchia in rural Attica some ten miles east of Athens proper.<sup>7</sup> "He was modest and superlatively handsome," opines a much later biographer.<sup>8</sup> Xenophon spent his early years in a city at war. As a teenager, he probably rode with the Athenian cavalry helping defend Attic farmland against Spartan incursions. He also found time to join the circle of highborn young men who clustered admiringly around Socrates. In 401, at the invitation of his old friend Proxenus, a twenty-something Xenophon joined the army of Cyrus. Proxenus, from Boeotia in central Greece, had recruited a mercenary contingent for Cyrus and held a general's rank in the army. For his part, Xenophon came along as a sort of observer, being "neither general nor captain nor common soldier" (*Anab.* 3.1.4). When the Cyrean commanders, Proxenus among them,

were massacred after Cunaxa, Xenophon stepped forward in his friend's place. He became a general and helped lead the Cyreans on their retreat from Cunaxa to the sea and thence to Byzantium.

It would be decades, though, before Xenophon could set this story down on papyrus. He did not go home to Athens in March 399 because the Athenians had sentenced him to exile during or shortly after the conclusion of the Cyrean march.<sup>9</sup> Instead, from 399 to 394 Xenophon remained in Asia Minor with the Cyreans. Although he clashed with Thibron, he got along famously with the Spartan king Agesilaus II (c. 445–359), who took over from Thibron in 396.<sup>10</sup> Agesilaus was supposed to be waging a panhellenic crusade against the "barbarian" Persians, but in 395 Sparta's erstwhile Greek allies rebelled, forcing Agesilaus's army back to mainland Hellas. Xenophon traveled with Agesilaus, allegedly even fighting on the Spartan side at the battle of Coronea in 394, against a Greek force that included Athenians. Unable to return to Athens, Xenophon turned to Agesilaus and other Spartan friends, who in 387 granted him a country estate at Scillus, near Olympia, in the Peloponnesus. There Xenophon settled until at least 371. He married and had children, sending his two sons to be educated at Sparta. The collapse of Spartan hegemony in the early 360s seems to have compelled Xenophon and his family to leave Scillus for Corinth, but a way home finally opened when, perhaps in 365, the Athenians rescinded their decree of exile. Xenophon divided the final years of his life between Corinth and Athens. His sons served in the Athenian cavalry, helping to redeem their father's reputation; one of them, Gryllus, fell in battle for Athens in 362. Exactly where Xenophon himself died, sometime around 355, remains uncertain; it may have been at Corinth, although five centuries later the locals at Scillus were fond of showing Roman tourists "the tomb of Xenophon."<sup>11</sup>

Wherever he died, it was at Scillus that Xenophon probably began writing in earnest. He wrote prodigiously, eventually producing some fourteen separate titles on a striking variety of subjects. His corpus includes philosophical dialogues, featuring Socrates; technical treatises on cavalry tactics, economics, horsemanship, hunting, and household management; a primer on Spartan government; a posthumous encomium of Agesilaus; a history of fourth-century Greece, a fictionalized biography of Cyrus the Great (founder of the Persian Empire); and the *Anabasis*.

Xenophon might have penned an early draft of the *Anabasis* while at Scillus, but the chronology of its composition remains a matter of contention.<sup>12</sup> Like several of his other works, it may have been set down in sec-

tions rather than as a unitary whole. There are some plausible grounds for a later date. For example, at one point in the text Xenophon seems to describe his Peloponnesian estate as a thing of the past. He reminds whoever holds and enjoys the place to offer the proper sacrifices to Artemis, lest they displease the goddess.<sup>13</sup> The tone suggests that he was writing after his removal from Scillus, his second home. Given this, it is not unreasonable to suggest that the *Anabasis* in the form we possess today was published perhaps in the early 360s, after Xenophon left Scillus but before he was able to return to Athens. Ultimately though, "all that can be said with confidence is that [it] was written late in Xenophon's life, not earlier."<sup>14</sup>

Consider, then, the circumstances under which Xenophon came to write the *Anabasis*. Having spent a decade campaigning with the Cyreans and then with the Spartans, he found himself an exile twice over, from Athens and then Scillus. He may have had some written records of the march—possibly lists of distances and routes traveled—but almost certainly no daily journal to spark his memory.<sup>15</sup> A full plate of other literary endeavors, from history to Socratic dialogues, demanded his attention. Moreover, Greece itself was in turmoil, because by the 360s the Thebans had defeated the heretofore invincible Spartans in battle and embarked on a short-lived hegemonic venture of their own. Why bother with the *Anabasis*?

### The *Anabasis* as Apologia

There are certainly elements of the *Anabasis* that address the troubled times of its composition. For instance, Xenophon includes numerous passages of practical military advice, not just for battle in open country but also for maneuvering in rugged terrain against irregular foes. Such tactical lessons would have found a ready audience in war-wracked fourth century Greece. Moreover, the *Anabasis* bears a subtle but clear panhellenist message: if only the Greeks would stop wrangling amongst themselves for hegemony at home and unite against Persia, they could easily destroy the Achaemenid empire.<sup>16</sup> Xenophon emphasizes the weakness and cowardice of Persian troops in contrast to the manly, courageous Cyreans. Persian power, he implicitly asserts, is a Potemkin village; if the Cyreans marched their way in and out of Persian territory, surely another Greek force could do the same. Indeed, the account of Cyrus's advance to Cunaxa essentially furnishes a road map—complete with descriptions of provisioning places, river crossings, and waterless stretches—for anyone planning to invade Mesopotamia.<sup>17</sup>

The predominant answer to the question of why Xenophon wrote, however, remains the one by Félix Dürbach more than a century ago: the *Anabasis* is an apologia, a self-defense intended to justify or even exaggerate its author's actions during the march.<sup>18</sup> Those who accept this explanation note that Xenophon was neither the first nor the only writer to narrate the story of the Cyreans. In particular, at least one other general, Sophaenetus of Stymphalus, apparently produced his own *Anabasis*, of which only the barest scraps survive.<sup>19</sup> It is impossible to reconstruct how Sophaenetus portrayed Xenophon, but some speculate that Xenophon wrote at least in part to publicize his own achievements, which he felt Sophaenetus had slighted. On this view, Xenophon adopted a third-person perspective to create an impression of greater objectivity, in essence to seduce the reader into believing Xenophon's version of events.

Reading the *Anabasis* as apologia has its attractions because Xenophon sometimes comes off as implausibly competent for a relatively inexperienced young man surrounded by seasoned, mostly older mercenaries. After the massacre of the generals, for instance, the Cyreans lie about in despair until Xenophon, prompted by a vision from Zeus, induces them to take heart and appoint new officers. His military recommendations, whether they involve preparing the army for the retreat, assaulting fortified enemy positions, or obtaining provisions, are almost invariably accepted, and they always turn out to be the right ones. He is strong and brave when others falter. In the mountains of Armenia, for example, with other men going snow-blind or freezing to death, Xenophon runs tirelessly back and forth along the army's marching column, distributing food and motivating stragglers.<sup>20</sup> Not even in wars of words does Xenophon come off poorly. Those who stand up against him in officers' councils or the army assembly often end up humiliated or tongue-tied; Xenophon usually remains eloquent and persuasive.<sup>21</sup>

Yet even the most cynical reader cannot find Xenophon an insufferable apologist because he recounts his follies along with his successes. Like other Cyreans, Xenophon, when he realizes the true goal of the expedition, follows Cyrus more from fear of seeming cowardly than from anything else. He repeatedly stresses his youth, admittedly sometimes to underline his precocious ability, but at other times to highlight his shortcomings.<sup>22</sup> In Thrace with Seuthes he drinks too much and delivers an impromptu, too-flowery speech. Nor does he omit his ill-advised and unsuccessful attempt to found a colony on the Black Sea coast, an incident that fueled much dissension amongst the Cyreans.<sup>23</sup> Xenophon may dwell on his achievements, but he tempers these with humor. At Cerasus on the Black

Sea, for example, he tells his troops to "take note that now, by the blessing of the gods, I am more confident than I was [before] and that I am bolder now than then and drink more wine" (*Anab.* 5.8.19). It is an appealing mix of boast and self-deprecation.

So the *Anabasis* reveals a Xenophon who is not omniscient but sometimes callow, drunk, and foolish. Moreover, the narrative incorporates much that seems to have no place in an organized, intentional apologia. William Higgins makes the point forcefully:

Why must Xenophon have necessarily have had an immediately practical purpose in mind when writing the *Anabasis* . . . ? Even if . . . he could have blown the dust off issues and events long past, why . . . spend so much time [on] so many things unrelated to apologia, like . . . the different kinds of native dances, descriptions of foreign food and foreign customs, strategic devices like winter leggings, various kinds of bows, and ways to cut glare from the sunlit snow? What has apologia got to do with men chasing ostriches and wild donkeys or getting sick on honey?

The *Anabasis*, Higgins continues, features Xenophon so prominently because it was intended as his idiosyncratic vision of the Cyrean march, not as a response to attacks by others; the work is "avowedly, not deceitfully or apologetically, one-sided."<sup>24</sup> Those who would censure Xenophon for his inaccuracies would, in any case, do well to remember Tim O'Brien's comment, "In war you lose your sense of the definite, hence your sense of truth itself, and therefore it's safe to say that in a true war story nothing is ever absolutely true."<sup>25</sup> Certainly the *Anabasis* constitutes to some degree tactical manual, panhellenist tract, even retrospective self-defense, but to focus on these aspects exclusively is unsatisfying because it obscures the defining character of the text: Xenophon himself.

## A Personal Journey

The title *Anabasis* derives from the Greek verb *anabainô*, "go up" or "go inland," hence its usual translation as *The March Upcountry*. In strictly geographical terms, as Leo Strauss noted, this describes only the first part of Xenophon's story, the advance from Sardis to Cunaxa; others divide the remainder of the narrative into *katabasis* ("march downcountry," from Cunaxa to the sea) and *parabasis* ("march alongside," on the Black Sea coast to Byzantium).<sup>26</sup> Yet such a literal interpretation seems misleading, as

Diogenes Laertius intimated centuries ago. Xenophon, asserts Diogenes, "did not march into Persia just for Cyrus; he was seeking a way up to Zeus, whatever it might be."<sup>27</sup> The title *Anabasis*, then, need not refer so much to the physical path of Cyrus's army as to Xenophon's own metaphorical ascent, his journey from being "neither general nor captain nor private soldier" to being leader of the Cyreans.

Xenophon's ascent begins in innocence. Neither he nor Proxenus—nor any of the mercenaries for that matter—realize what lies ahead.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, his preparations for the journey reveal a youthful impetuosity. Receiving the invitation from Proxenus, Xenophon asks the advice of Socrates, who tells him to consult the oracle of Apollo at Delphi. This Xenophon does, although Socrates afterwards chides him "because he did not first put the question whether it were better for him to go or stay, but decided for himself that he was to go and then asked the god as to the best way of going" (*Anab.* 3.1.7). Socrates had reason to be cautious because associating with a Persian prince was a good way for an aristocratic young man to get bad marks from the democratic Athenian government. Yet Xenophon, unaware that he will never see Socrates again, happily sets off for Sardis and Cyrus. Before Cunaxa, Xenophon presents himself as awake but unaware, knowing where the expedition is headed but too ashamed to drop out. After Cunaxa and the massacre of the generals, though, Xenophon's ascent, his spiritual "journey up," accelerates abruptly. Inspired by Zeus, he awakens from despondency, rallies the dispirited Cyreans, becomes a general, and reorganizes the army for retreat. The remainder of the *Anabasis* demonstrates the possibilities and limitations for Xenophon of his new self-awareness. The march to the sea, for instance, is all about possibilities. There are hostile tribesmen to be overcome, mountain passes and rivers to be crossed, soldiers to be inspired and commanded. The Cyreans surpass one obstacle after another, and with each step Xenophon accomplishes more, sees more, learns more.

Along the Black Sea shore, however, the lessons are different. Despite all that Xenophon now knows, he fails in his colonizing venture, provokes division amongst the Cyreans, and finds his authority challenged by rival officers. Coastal settlements refuse to provide provisions, soldiers desert or mutiny, and the army splits temporarily into three factions. By its final chapters, Xenophon's narrative betrays a certain weariness as one battle blurs into the next. Xenophon would like to go home, but he is repeatedly prevented from relinquishing command of the Cyreans. At last, he writes, "Thibron arrived and took over the army, and



uniting it with the rest of his Greek forces, proceeded to wage war" on the Persians (*Anab.* 7.8.24). Yet even this final sentence carries no promise of closure. Xenophon has made the journey from innocence to experience; his *Anabasis* is over, but his wandering life has only just begun.

### Questions of Genre: Ancient and Modern

If the *Anabasis* represents a personal vision of Xenophon's ascent to experience, where does it fit into the currents of ancient Greek literature? Paul Cartledge names the *Anabasis* "the earliest example of the genre of reflective autobiographical travelogue."<sup>29</sup> This is quite a mouthful and only reflects the difficulty of neatly categorizing such an innovative work. Xenophon clearly borrowed from a range of established classical genres, including travel writing, history, and rhetoric.<sup>30</sup> For instance, the *Anabasis* constitutes in some sense a historical account of Cyrus's expedition and its aftermath, one in which "possibly for the first time in Greek historiography, the presentation of the individual and his activities are the primary means by which the historian communicates information about the past."<sup>31</sup> At another level, it represents a pioneer experiment in autobiography, a term for which fourth-century Greeks possessed no real equivalent.<sup>32</sup> Or it can be seen as a prototype of the technical military-campaign commentary, of which Caesar's writings are probably the best-known examples. Yet pigeonholing the *Anabasis* into any single genre is as unsatisfying as reading its title literally. Much ancient literature did not hew to rigid boundaries; autobiographical writing in particular comprehended a range of overlapping traditions, lengths, forms, and styles. Xenophon likewise mixes history, autobiography, and didactic commentary, but his personal vision shapes the *Anabasis* into something altogether new.

Although its form was unprecedented in antiquity, the *Anabasis* shares much in common with what Samuel Hynes calls the "personal narrative" genre of modern military writing, "first-person writings in prose by participants in the events recorded." For Hynes, post-facto memoirs are the "more complex kind of personal narrative: reflective, selective, more self-consciously constructed than the immediate reports, an old self looking back—sometimes across half a century—at what the young self did, what happened to him, what changed him." Such memoirs are neither history, nor travel writing, nor autobiography, but stories, attempts to explain the unexplainable sensations of war. And, Hynes asserts, there is "always one story—the individual's journey from innocence into experience, the serial discovery of what had before been unimaginable, the reality of war."<sup>33</sup>

The congruence between the *Anabasis* and Hynes's conception of the memoir as a journey into experience is evident. There are other congruencies. Modern memoirists, for instance, tend to report their wars plainly and without metaphor, adopting a style that comes "as close as language can to rendering the things of the material world as they are."<sup>34</sup> Some of them unconsciously, others deliberately, these memoirists focus on seeing, smelling, feeling the realities of war. Xenophon likewise appeals to physicality, to the language of the senses. Here is how he recounts part of the Cyrean ordeal in the mountains of Armenia (*Anab.* 4.4.11-13):

There came such a terrible snowfall . . . that it completely covered both arms and men as they slept . . . and everybody was very reluctant to get up, for as the men lay there the snow that had fallen upon them . . . was a source of warmth. But once Xenophon had mustered the courage to get up without his cloak and set about splitting wood, another man also speedily got up, took the axe away from him, and went on with the splitting. Thereupon the rest got up and proceeded to build fires and anoint themselves; for they found ointment there in abundance which they used in place of olive oil—made of pork fat, sesame, bitter almonds, or turpentine. They also found a fragrant oil made out of these same ingredients.

Even in its original Greek, this passage is straightforward and unadorned, no complex verb constructions or fancy word order. Notice in particular the specificity with which Xenophon names the ointment and oil his men find, how his description highlights the smell and feel of the moment. Indeed, he is always exacting in his choice of vocabulary. Like World War I soldiers who write "five-nines"—German 5.9 centimeter guns—rather than generic "artillery," Xenophon pays special attention to the vocabulary of destruction. When a weapon appears in the *Anabasis*, it is not just a "sword," but a *machaira*, a particular type of machete-like slashing blade, or an *encheiridion*, a knife small enough to be concealed in the hand.<sup>35</sup>

In fact, Xenophon goes a step beyond the bounds Hynes sets. By using a third-person perspective, he essentially creates another Xenophon, a younger self. The reader becomes Xenophon's older self, looking back across three decades at the brash youth who asked Apollo not whether he ought to join Cyrus but to which gods he should sacrifice before going. Like modern soldiers looking back at their wartime experiences, Xenophon confronts the challenges of fading memory and confined vision. He suc-

ceeds in bearing witness to how things felt, to what it was like to be there, not because he sought to deceive but because he wanted to remember.

## Soldier Narrative and Commander Narrative

Italo Calvino once compared reading the *Anabasis*, with its flickering images of men struggling against enemies and weather, to watching an old war documentary on late-night television.<sup>36</sup> Yet the *Anabasis* is not just a modern soldiers' tale dressed up with spears and bronze helmets. For one thing, Xenophon is no common soldier but a general. Hynes excludes the lives of generals, noting that "in modern wars, commanders don't usually do the fighting, or live with their troops, or get themselves shot at."<sup>37</sup> Xenophon does all three, simply because his army travels in a different technological world. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, commander narratives and personal soldier narratives are inevitably separate affairs. Generals use radio or telephone to direct their troops, who of necessity spread out across the landscape seeking cover and concealment. Artillery or air strikes can be summoned from miles away. The modern general is a battle manager, not a frontline fighter.

This separation was impossible in antiquity, where long range on the battlefield meant no more than the two hundred yards or so that a skilled slinger could cast his lead bullet.<sup>38</sup> Battles in the ancient Greek world were decided by men wielding shield and spear in close-order formation, their leaders fighting alongside them rather than directing from the rear. The conditions of the Cyrean march, in addition, meant that Xenophon could never withdraw to a comfortable headquarters behind the lines. The entire army was a front line, and so Xenophon marched, cooked, ate, and slept alongside his men, night and day, for two years. For him there was no dividing line between commander narrative and soldier narrative.

Of course, in modern warfare before the twentieth century, commanders often shared the dangers of battle and the hardships of campaign life with their troops. Even in nonmechanized armies, however, the distance between commander and fighter persists, psychologically if not physically. Officers in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European armies, for instance, for the most part were of a socioeconomic class distinctly different from that of the men they commanded. Moreover, officer status tended to carry with it powerful social and legal privilege. The situation was entirely different for Xenophon. Among the Cyreans, officers could

be elected, and soldiers could voice their opinions in an army assembly. Corporal punishment, a disciplinary standard in European armies, was generally unacceptable to the Cyreans; Xenophon in fact found himself at one point accused in the assembly for having unjustly struck a soldier.<sup>39</sup> In the *Anabasis*, in other words, not just the physical but also the psychological distance between officers and men was minimal.

### Representations of Injury and Death

The *Anabasis* also diverges from modern war memoirs in its representation of injury and death. Here again technological mediation has a decisive effect. Explosives, napalm, and high-velocity bullets, the staples of twentieth- and twenty-first-century war, disfigure and destroy as they kill. As Hynes notes, modern warfare turns even human bodies into grotesque, broken rubbish, hence the nauseating depictions of battlefield death that form a cornerstone of modern war memoirs.<sup>40</sup> Things were different in antiquity. True, spears and swords could inflict horrible injuries—after the massacre of the generals, Xenophon records, “Nikarchos the Arkadian reached the camp in flight, wounded in his belly and holding his intestines in his hands” (*Anab.* 2.5.33). Still, no ancient technology could wholly obliterate human bodies as a Japanese eight-inch shell did William Manchester’s buddies one morning on Okinawa.<sup>41</sup> The dead of the *Anabasis*, even horribly mutilated, remain recognizable as human forms. Nor did Xenophon regularly face death in the industrial quantities produced by machine guns, artillery, and poison gas. True, there appear on occasion heaps of corpses for the Cyreans to deal with but never so many and not so often as in modern war. Death in the *Anabasis* appears fleetingly and quietly and in less overwhelming doses than in modern war narratives.

Xenophon rarely depicts individual death, and when he does it is with restraint. In the mountains of Kardouchia, for example, his rearguard was forced to move so quickly that its progress “became more like a flight than a march. Then it was that a brave man was killed, Kleonymos the Lakonian, who was pierced in the side by an arrow that went through his shield and jerkin; also Basias the Arkadian, who was shot clean through the head” (*Anab.* 4.1.18). Some liken this passage to the combat scenes of the *Iliad* and see Xenophon adopting a Homeric, epic style here. Yet Homer’s battle deaths are graphic if not lurid, full of splattering blood and improbably dismembered bodies. Xenophon in contrast gives Kleonymos and Basias swift, quiet deaths. Later, he reproaches Cheirisophus, commander of the army’s advance guard: “And now two good and brave

men are dead, and we weren't able to retrieve their bodies or bury them" (*Anab.* 4.1.19). There were tactical reasons for hurrying, Cheirisophus explains, but Xenophon makes his point: brave men deserve proper burial.

Xenophon's reproach to his fellow general introduces another divergence between the *Anabasis* and modern war memoirs. Whenever possible, the Cyreans gave proper ritual attention to their own dead, if not immediately then soon after battle. On the Black Sea coast, for instance, the army mounted a special expedition to collect and bury several hundred men who had been killed the previous day on an abortive foraging expedition.<sup>42</sup> Elsewhere, the soldiers make time to honor a number of Arkadians who had fallen in an ambush (*Anab.* 6.4.9):

They buried the greater part of the dead just where they each had fallen; for they had already lain unburied five days, and it was not now possible to carry away the bodies; some that lay upon the roads, however, they did gather together and honor with as fine a burial as their means allowed, while for those they could not find, they erected a great cenotaph, and placed wreaths upon it.

Leaving Kleonymos and Basias unburied, then, was unusual. Normally the Cyreans found time to mourn their dead properly. Modern armies in contrast often treat human bodies, if they can be retrieved at all, as simply another industrial byproduct. Jonathan Shay, in fact, counts the indifference or disrespect of Graves Registration personnel and the hasty, anonymous removal of the dead from the battlefield among the great failings of the American army in Vietnam.<sup>43</sup> For twentieth-century memoirists, the unburied dead represent "materials of the earth, to be walked over or around, and even used, when necessary, in the construction projects of war."<sup>44</sup> The dead of the *Anabasis* retain their humanity. In the modern soldiers' tale they too often become objects.<sup>45</sup>

### A Community on the March

There are further cultural differences to consider. Modern armies are formal, contained units; noncombatants such as family members and prostitutes are, at least in theory, kept out of and away from the fighting units. The comforts of home and sex are supposed to exist somewhere else, subjects for nostalgia or fantasy. In truth, soldiers in virtually all times and places have had recourse to sex, both heterosexual and homosexual. According to Hynes, not until Vietnam did brothels and drunkenness figure much in

modern narratives of war as memoirs of the two world wars scarcely mention soldiers' sexuality.<sup>46</sup> Xenophon, in contrast, makes no secret of the fact that the Cyreans were at various times accompanied by large numbers of both female and male noncombatants. Indeed, at one point the army accumulated so many captives that the generals felt compelled to sort them out and expel them. Even so, the soldiers smuggled through a number of beautiful boys and women, who then marched with the army all the way to Byzantium. These captives soon formed lasting sexual and emotional liaisons with the soldiers, which Xenophon recounts as part of the everyday routine of the army.<sup>47</sup> He does not foreground these non-combatants, but their presence transforms the *Anabasis* into a narrative not just of war but also of community life.

### Comradeship and Small-Group Bonds

There was, however, no formal logistical structure in the *Anabasis* army: no chow line, no supply sergeants, no post exchange. Cyreans had to fend for themselves, forming into small groups of *suskênoi* ("tent-mates") to obtain the necessities of life. The perils of this nonsystem appear vividly in Xenophon's account (*Anab.* 4.5.5):

They got through that night by keeping up fires, for there was wood in abundance at the stopping place; those who came up late, however, had none, and consequently the men who had arrived early and were keeping a fire would not allow the late comers to get near it unless they gave them a share of their wheat or anything else they had that was edible.

Comradeship and intense primary group fidelity are, undeniably, central to the modern soldiers' tale.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*, by highlighting a theme prominent in a number of World War II narratives, succeeded in making "group bonding" something of a cliché. The *Anabasis* and modern memoirs share an emphasis on the importance of comradeship in small units, but for the Cyreans comradeship was far more pervasive. In the *Anabasis* soldiers rely utterly on each other not just during battle but also during every moment of the march. A man without *suskênoi* was left behind in the snow to die. Few modern narratives, with the exception perhaps of World War II Axis memoirs of winter retreat in Russia, portray comradeship with such intensity.<sup>49</sup>

Technological and cultural differences make the *Anabasis* unlike the modern soldiers' tale in several key respects. Still, there are congruencies between Xenophon and more recent memoirists, made more striking by the millennia separating him from the soldiers Hynes investigates. It is worth examining Xenophon's influence on subsequent military life writing.

### Influences on Subsequent War Writing

In antiquity Xenophon earned praise as "the Attic bee" for his sweet, pure prose.<sup>50</sup> The *Anabasis* was widely read and referenced, in particular by the Roman Imperial writer Arrian (Lucius Flavius Arrianus, ca. AD 80–160), who styled himself the New Xenophon and systematically imitated some of Xenophon's writing.<sup>51</sup> Like Xenophon, Arrian was a military man and versatile writer who had seen his share of combat. Yet his *Anabasis Alexandri* is no personal journey into experience but rather a heroic history of Alexander the Great's campaign against Persia. Indeed, Arrian's account of his own battle experiences, the *Order of Battle against the Alans*, reads more like a parade-ground handbook than a memoir.

Republican Romans also read Xenophon; Cicero in fact grumbled that his contemporaries were brought up on stories from Xenophon and other Greek writers rather than having learned the deeds of famous Romans.<sup>52</sup> The military commentaries of the most famous of Cicero's contemporaries, Julius Caesar, reveal an apparent similarity with the *Anabasis* in that Caesar too uses a third-person narrative. Caesar, however, used this technique for entirely different purposes than did Xenophon. He was not writing decades after the fact and for personal reasons but was producing what might be termed a collection of official communiqués, straight from the battlefields of Gaul and Greece, intended to celebrate his own glory as leader and commander. None of the reflection, the looking back at a younger self, that appears so strongly in the *Anabasis* is displayed in Caesar's commentaries.

Arrian and Caesar, it would seem, started a trend. Ancient or modern, authors who reference the *Anabasis* tend to pick up its surface characteristics, not Xenophon's personal vision.<sup>53</sup> For many the *Anabasis* represents the original long march. R. E. Dupuy, for instance, describes the Czech Legion's 1918–20 trek across Russia as "the most remarkable *Anabasis* and *Katabasis* since the days of Xenophon and the Ten Thousand."<sup>54</sup> When seven thousand Zulu workers made a two-week, four-hundred-kilometer escape across the South African veldt at the outbreak of the Boer War,

London newspapers readily drew analogies to Xenophon.<sup>55</sup> Similarly, American journalists thrilled in comparing the *Anabasis* to the 1846–47 exploits of Colonel Alexander Doniphan, who led an army contingent from New Orleans across the Santa Fe Trail and south into Mexico.<sup>56</sup> “Xenophon and Doniphan,” crowed William Cullen Bryant, “these are the names of two military commanders who have made the most extraordinary marches known in the annals of warfare. . . . These two men, whose names are in sound so similar, have each performed the most wonderful march.”<sup>57</sup>

Relatively few personal narratives, however, explicitly trace their lineage to the Cyreans. Jaroslav Hasek, in a picaresque novel drawing from his World War I experiences, makes his “good soldier” Svejek recall the *Anabasis*.<sup>58</sup> Italo Calvino comments that Xenophon finds echoes in the stories of Italian Alpini troops on their retreat from Russia; one of them even dubbed his memoir “a little *Anabasis* in dialect.”<sup>59</sup> Eugenio Corti, another Italian veteran, displays classical erudition by comparing his Russian ordeal to the Athenian retreat from Syracuse in 413 BC rather than to the march of the Cyreans.<sup>60</sup> References to Xenophon, it seems, come more often from later commentators than from the memoirists themselves.<sup>61</sup>

There is another factor to consider: Xenophon’s place in the canon of modern classical education. Xenophon was widely read in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe but fell out of favor by the nineteenth century.<sup>62</sup> The same purity of style and language that drew Arrian to him led many nineteenth- and, eventually, twentieth-century classicists to disdain Xenophon. He seemed too simple, too credulous, to be worthy of study or imitation.<sup>63</sup> The best-known of classically educated war writers, the British authors and poets of the Great War, preferred more erudite authors like Homer or the poets of the Greek Anthology.<sup>64</sup> The vast majority of modern soldiers who did not enjoy the luxury of a classical Greek and Latin education were, it seems fair to say, even less likely to be exposed to Xenophon.

But perhaps to look for explicit traces of Xenophon in later military lifewriting is misguided, for as Hynes observes, most war narratives display “nothing to suggest that the author is aware of any previous example.”<sup>65</sup> Even those soldiers who did read him, then, need not have taken Xenophon as their model. So it may well be that Xenophon stands in the peculiar position of being the first author to write in a genre without a tradition, insofar as we can reasonably speak of a single unified genre of war writing extending across three millennia. Between him and the other writers examined in this volume lie centuries of cultural, technological, and literary change. Probably no more than a handful of these writers



ever heard of, much less read, Xenophon's memoir. The *Anabasis* remains in some respect most noteworthy for the ways in which it diverges from rather than conforms to modern concepts of military autobiography. Yet for all this difference, Xenophon shares an intimate link with the men and women whose stories appear in the following pages. Like them, he conveys a particular, personal vision of military life. Like them, he mourns the death of comrades and exults in friendship and in the pleasures of small respites from the bleakness of combat. Like them, he attempts to describe the indescribable sensations of war: fear, hunger, sickness, exhaustion. Whether or not they realize it, anyone who writes of arms and the self marches with Xenophon.

## Notes

1. All quotations from Xenophon's *Anabasis* are drawn, with some slight modifications, from the readily available Loeb Classical Library translation by C. L. Brownson and edited by John Dillery, *Xenophon: Anabasis* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1998), and are used by permission of the publishers and trustees of the Loeb Classical Library, copyright © 1998 by the president and fellows of Harvard College. In accordance with the conventions of classical studies, references to the *Anabasis* (abbreviated "*Anab.*") are by book, chapter, and section number. Translations from ancient authors besides Xenophon are my own except where otherwise indicated. In order to serve a broad audience, I have kept secondary source citations to a minimum and indicated works accessible to nonspecialists.

2. Ernst Badian, "Alexander's Mules," *New York Review of Books* (Dec. 20, 1979): 54–56.

3. The standard history of Greek mercenary service remains H. W. Parke, *Greek Mercenary Soldiers from the Earliest Times to the Battle of Ipsus* (Oxford, U.K.: Clarendon, 1933).

4. Cyrus specifically mentions Peloponnesians, who were renowned for their military prowess.

5. The expedition of Cyrus has generated a sizeable bibliography, much of it usefully collected in Otto Lendle, *Kommentar zu Xenophons Anabasis (Bücher 1–7)* (Darmstadt, Ger.: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1995), and Jan P. Stronk, *The Ten Thousand in Thrace: An Archaeological and Historical Commentary on Xenophon's Anabasis, Books VI.iii–vi–VII* (Amsterdam, Neth.: Gieben, 1995). Nonspecialists may find Dillery, *Xenophon*, 1–40, of most use.

6. For detailed itineraries see Arthur Boucher, *L'Anabase de Xénophon (Retraite des Dix Mille) avec un commentaire historique et militaire* (Paris: Berger-Levrault, 1913); and H. R. Breitenbach, "Xenophon von Athen," in *Paulys Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft* 9.A.2, 1569–1928 (1967). For maps, consult Lendle, *Kommentar zu Xenophons Anabasis*, and Valerio Manfredi, *La Strada dei Diecimila: Topografia e Geografia dell'Oriente di Senofonte* (Milan, Ital.: JACA, 1986).

7. On Xenophon's life and writings see Breitenbach, "Xenophon von Athen"; J. K. Anderson, *Xenophon* (New York: Scribner's, 1974); Édouard Delebecque, *Essai sur la vie de Xénophon*, (Paris: Librairie C. Klincksieck, 1957); W. E. Higgins, *Xenophon the Athenian: The Problem of the Individual and the Society of the Polis* (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1977). For insightful short treatments, see Peter Krentz, *Xenophon: Hellenika II. 3.11-IV.2.8*. (Warminster, U.K.: Aris and Phillips, 1995), 1-11; Sarah Pomeroy, *Xenophon, Oeconomicus: A Social and Historical Commentary* (Oxford, U.K.: Clarendon, 1994), 1-5; and Christopher Tuplin, s.v. "Xenophon (1)," *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3d ed. (1996), 1628-1631.

8. Diogenes Laertius 2.48 (trans. Anderson); Diogenes wrote in the third century AD.

9. It remains uncertain whether Xenophon was exiled in 399 (on account of his friendship with Socrates, who was executed that same year) or in 394 (for being pro-Spartan).

10. On Xenophon and Agesilaus, see Paul Cartledge, *Agesilaus and the Crisis of Sparta* (London: Duckworth, 1987).

11. See *Anab.* 5.3.7-13 (Xenophon's description of Scillus) and Pausanias 5.6.6 ("the tomb of Xenophon").

12. Dillery, *Xenophon*, 8-9; Stronk, *The Ten Thousand in Thrace*, 8-10.

13. *Anab.* 5.3.13 (proper sacrifices to Artemis).

14. Dillery, *Xenophon*, 9.

15. James Roy, "Xenophon's *Anabasis*: The Command of the Rearguard in Books 3 and 4," *Phoenix* 22, no. 2 (1968), 158-59; James Roy, "Xenophon's Evidence for the *Anabasis*," *Athenaeum: Studi Periodici di Letteratura e Storia dell' Antichità* New Series 46 Fasc. I-II (1968), 37-46. See also Breitenbach, "Xenophon von Athen," 1649-50.

16. For a different perspective, see Higgins, *Xenophon the Athenian*, 97-98.

17. Scholars who have walked the Cyrean route for themselves confirm the accuracy of Xenophon's topography; see for example Frank Williams, "Xenophon's Dana and the Passage of Cyrus' Army over the Taurus Mountains," *Historia* 45, no. 3 (1996), 284-314.

18. Félix Dürrbach, "L'apologie de Xénophon dans l'*Anabase*," *Revue des Études Grecques* 6 (1893), 343. See also Anderson, *Xenophon*, 80-84; and Dillery, *Xenophon*, 6-8.

19. Fragments of Sophocles' writing survive only as brief quotations in the work of the grammarian Stephanus of Byzantium (sixth century AD).

20. *Anab.* 3.1.11-25 (Xenophon rallies the Cyreans); *Anab.* 3.2.27-33 (preparations for retreat); 4.8.10-14 (assault); 5.1.5-13 (provisioning); 4.5.7-9 (in the mountains of Armenia).

21. See, for example, *Anab.* 3.1.26-32 (a company commander is ridiculed and driven away for contradicting Xenophon); 5.8.1-26 (Cyreans who accuse Xenophon of too-harsh discipline end up admitting it was all for their own good).

22. *Anab.* 3.1.10 (fear of seeming cowardly). Stress on youth: see, for example, *Anab.* 3.2.37 (older generals should take the lead) and 3.4.42 (an older general should stay in command of the army).

23. *Anab.* 7.3.26-33 (in Thrace with Seuthes) and 6.5.15-20 (Black Sea colony).

24. Higgins, *Xenophon the Athenian*, 93-94, 95-96; against this view see Arnold Momigliano, *The Development of Greek Biography*, exp. ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1993), 57.

25. Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (New York: Broadway, 1990), 82.
26. Leo Strauss, "Xenophon's *Anabasis*," *Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy* 4:3 (1975), 117. See also Dillery, *Xenophon*, 8, and Stronk, *The Ten Thousand in Thrace*, 7.
27. Diogenes Laertius 2.58.
28. *Anab.* 3.1.4–10.
29. Paul Cartledge, *The Greeks: A Portrait of Self and Others* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993), 44.
30. Momigliano, *The Development of Greek Biography*, 14–15 and 45–57.
31. Dillery, *Xenophon*, 71.
32. Momigliano, *The Development of Greek Biography*, 14 and 47. Greeks spoke of *hupomnēmata* or "memoirs" but not of autobiography per se. Xenophon's obituaries of Cyrus (*Anab.* 1.9.1–31) and the murdered Cyrean generals (2.6.1–30), including Proxenus (2.6.16–20), stand out as the first biographical epilogues in Greek literature.
33. Samuel Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War* (New York: Penguin, 1997), xiv, 1–16, 17.
34. Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale*, 25–26.
35. *Anab.* 4.3.12 (*encheiridion*); *Anab.* 1.8.7 (*machaira*). On Xenophon's specificity of language see Higgins, *Xenophon the Athenian*, 2–7.
36. Italo Calvino, *Why Read the Classics?* trans. Jonathan Cape (New York: Pantheon, 1999), 19.
37. Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale*, xv.
38. That slingers using lead bullets could shoot this distance, outranging even archers, is but one of the tiny but telling details Xenophon provides; see *Anab.* 3.3.16–18.
39. *Anab.* 5.8.1–26.
40. Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale*, 7–8.
41. William Manchester, *Goodbye, Darkness: A Memoir of the Pacific War* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), 384.
42. *Anab.* 6.5.5–6. See also Pamela Vaughn, "The Identification and Retrieval of the Hoplite Battle-Dead," in *Hoplites: The Classical Greek Battle Experience*, ed. Victor Davis Hanson (London: Routledge, 1991), 38–62.
43. Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 57–62.
44. Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale*, 69.
45. This is not to say modern soldiers never treat their dead with reverence. Perhaps the difference lies in time constraints: usually the Cyreans had time to look after their dead, in between episodes of battle; the continuous operations of modern warfare, in contrast, offer less opportunity for such rituals.
46. Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale*, 186.
47. *Anab.* 4.1.12–14 (some captives expelled, others smuggled through). For relationships between captives and soldiers, see especially *Anab.* 4.3.19, 4.6.1–3 and 7.4.7–11.
48. Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale*, 9–10.
49. See for instance Eugenio Corti, *Few Returned: Twenty-eight Days on the Russian Front, Winter 1942–1943* (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1997); Guy Sajer, *The Forgotten Soldier* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971).

50. Pomeroy, *Xenophon, Oeconomicus*, 11–15.
51. A. B. Bosworth, *A Historical Commentary on Arrian's History of Alexander* (Oxford, U.K.: Clarendon, 1980).
52. Anderson, *Xenophon*, 2.
53. Anderson, *Xenophon*, 1–8, reviews European attitudes to Xenophon from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries.
54. R. Ernest Dupuy, *Perish by the Sword: The Czechoslovakian Anabasis and Our Supporting Campaigns in North Russia and Siberia, 1918–1920*. (Harrisburg, Pa.: Military Service, 1939), 54; see also Edgar Chen and Emily Van Buskirk (2001). "The Czech Legion's Long Journey Home," *Military History Quarterly* 13, no. 2 (2001), 42–53.
55. Elsabé Brink, 1899, *The Long March Home: A Little-known Incident in the Anglo-Boer War* (Cape Town, South Africa: Kwela, 1999), 99–101.
56. Joseph G. Dawson III, *Doniphan's Epic March: The 1st Missouri Volunteers in the Mexican War* (Lawrence: Univ. Press of Kansas, 1999), 191–202.
57. Dawson, *Doniphan's Epic March*, 198.
58. Jaroslav Hasek, *The Good Soldier Svejk and His Fortunes in the World War*, trans. Cecil Parrott (New York: Penguin, 1985).
59. Elio Vittorini, *Il sergente nella neve*, qtd. in Calvino, *Why Read the Classics?* 22.
60. Corti, *Few Returned*, 245; Thucydides briefly describes the Athenian retreat in book seven of his history of the Peloponnesian War.
61. Echoes of the *Anabasis* appear in one scene of T. E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*; see Jeffrey Meyers, *The Wounded Spirit: T. E. Lawrence's Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (New York: St. Martin's, 1989), 22–23. For more on Lawrence's literary inheritances, see Terry Reilly, "T. E. Lawrence, Modernism, and Cultural Poetics," in this volume.
62. Anderson, *Xenophon*, 4–8.
63. Xenophon's works, particularly the *Anabasis*, were widely used for beginning Greek instruction in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This, paradoxically, may have put later writers off Xenophon—as they looked for literary models, they sought to avoid the bad memories of their early struggles with Greek grammar and syntax.
64. Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford Univ. Press, 1975), 161, 180–181.
65. Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale*, 4.

# Arms and the Self

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Autobiographical  
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