

Transposable Persians: Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* as Transcultural Memory

Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* is a work deeply invested in the power of example, presenting the life of Cyrus the Great as a case study in leadership (cf. 1.1-6). Composing this fictionalized biography for a fourth-century Greek-speaking audience, Xenophon's choice of a Persian monarch as his exemplary subject highlights the work's innately multicultural nature, and draws attention to the ways in which the Hellenic author is adapting Persian characters and setting to appeal to a Greek readership. Building upon scholarship concerning the *Cyropaedia*'s exemplary and intercultural dynamics, this paper is primarily engaged with the text's exemplum-driven mode of storytelling and attempt to "bridge the gap" between foreign source material and Greek cultural conventions, and approaches these issues from the standpoint of current cultural memory studies.

Some thirty years ago, Philip Stadter remarked on the importance of audience engagement in the composition and aims of the *Cyropaedia*, which crafts a vision of Cyrus' milieu that "offers few obstacles to the reader transposing the lessons of Cyrus' life into his own world" (1991, 479). This kind of "transposition"—from past to present, from Persian to Greek—guides this paper's approach to Cyrus' multicultural reception, and recent directions in cultural memory studies have provided a useful framework for engaging how mythologized narrative exempla—like those involving Cyrus the Great, whose deeds were already immortalized in West Asian cultural memory by Xenophon's time (1.2.1)—can "travel" across borders, gain currency among diverse new communities, assume new shades of significance for new audiences, and thus generate novel traditions of storytelling. My paper applies insights from this emergent field of transcultural memory to investigate the "transposable" construction of Cyrus' life and cultural context in Xenophon's biography.

The paper proceeds in three parts. In the first, I introduce the concept of transcultural memory as grounding for the central analysis of the *Cyropaedia*. The second part turns to the text itself, by examining three distinctive features of the work, and re-evaluating them as "toolmarks" of

Xenophon's intercultural adaptation and exemplification. These three features include: 1) the notable lack of detail in the biography's historical West Asian setting, represented in consistently vague and generalizing references that contrast strikingly with the close geographical detail provided by the same author in the *Anabasis*; 2) the text's merging of past and present timeframes through anachronistic retrojection of contemporary Persian culture and political realities onto Cyrus the Great's sixth-century context, a tendency verbally marked by the pervasive phrase ἔτι καὶ νῦν ("even to this day") that signifies continuity between Persia's present and past; and 3) the semi-Hellenization of its Persian characters, who are depicted with some authentically Persian ethnic identifiers, but many more recognizably Hellenic attributes, involving religious practice, political ideology, and social organization—a mode of ethnic representation fittingly referred to as a *translatio Graeca* by Tamiolaki (2017, 179-80). The third part of the paper concludes the study with a brief consideration, in dialogue with the concept of transcultural memory, of how Xenophon's Greek adaptation of Cyrus the Great influenced subsequent receptions of the Persian king—notably in the modern nation of Iran, where Cyrus in his original geographical context remains an important figure of cultural memory, but is invoked in terms strongly reminiscent of his Hellenic/Xenophonic depiction as an idealized moral exemplum.

Examining the *Cyropaedia* as a case study in the reception, production, and transmission of transcultural memory, this paper thus aims to apply a fresh and valuable framework to this widely studied text, one that sheds light on salient features of the *Cyropaedia*, while situating the work and its Persian subject within a wider matrix of historical acts of reception.

Select Bibliography

- Ansari, A. 2021. "A Royal Romance: The Cult of Cyrus the Great in Modern Iran." *JRAS* 31:3, 405-19.
- Bichler, R. 2020. "Cyropaedia – 'Historical Space' and the Nations at the Fringes of the Oikumene," in *Ancient Information on Persia Re-assessed: Xenophon's Cyropaedia*:

Proceedings of a Conference Held at Marburg in Honour of Christopher J. Tuplin,
December 1–2, 2017, ed. B. Jacobs, 73-103.

De Cesari, C. & Rigney, A. eds. 2014. *Transnational Memory: Circulation, Articulation, Scales.*

Berlin: De Gruyter.

Erl, A. 2011. "Travelling Memory." *Parallax* 17:4, 4-18.

Gray, V. J. 2010. *Xenophon's Mirror of Princes: Reading the Reflections.* Oxford: Oxford

University Press.

Mitchell, L. 2023. *Cyrus the Great: A Biography of Kingship.* London: Routledge.

Stadter, P. A. 1991. "Fictional Narrative in the *Cyropaedia*." *AJP* 112:4, 461-491.

Tamiolaki, M. 2017. "Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*: Tentative Answers to an Enigma," in *The*

Cambridge Companion to Xenophon, ed. M. A. Flower, 174-194.