Dreaming of the Greek Nation: Xenophon's Panhellenism

Ancient Greece, as everyone knows, was a city-state culture that was never politically unified. The glorious alliance against the Mede forged in 481 B.C., nowadays called the "Hellenic League," included a small number of cities—a bare 37 out of more than 1,000 spread across the Mediterranean. Yet throughout the ancient period, Greeks continued to see themselves as an identifiable cultural group of likeminded peoples speaking the same language, attending the same festivals, and sharing the same customs. Over the course of the Classical Period, the sentiment grew that Greeks ought to put aside their differences, stop fighting each other, and unite against the common enemy of Greek "freedom" (usually Persia, sometimes an oppressive Greek city such as Athens, Sparta, or Thebes). Scholars have typically read the panhellenic appeals of fourth century literature (especially Isocrates and Xenophon) as either starry-eyed wishful thinking or cynical ploys to claim for the speaker's city-state the right to rule everybody else (Low 2018; Yates 2019; cf. Flower 2000). In this paper, I argue that these thinkers (focusing on Xenophon) were much more serious in their panhellenic aspirations. They were pointing the way forward to a more democratic future for "Greece," in which cities would take their proper place in a republic of states. It was, in essence, the dream of a Federal League of Greece: a κοινὸν Ἑλληνικόν.

The sympathy between soul and regime, a commonplace of fourth century Greek philosophy, was at the bottom of this project. Just as the souls of individual citizens can be measured by external moral standards, so city-states could be held to similar principles. Xenophon emphasizes the importance of a leader's duty to seek the common good of all, to promote a virtuous ruling class, and to secure willing obedience from the ruled (Gray 1989; Ferrario 2016; Alwine 2021–2022). These principles applied to states as well, and when they fell short, they could be condemned along the same lines. The failing of Athens and Sparta as imperial cities was not, for Xenophon, their position of hegemony. It was that they exploited this position tyrannically. In the famous "crimes of Sparta" section of the *Hellenica* (5.4.1), Xenophon makes this clear. The

Spartans had violated their oaths to leave the Greek cities autonomous and would be punished by the very men they had most wronged (the Thebans). This high-handed policy of violating "Greek freedom" converted Spartan hegemony into an unsustainable despotism (Tuplin 1993).

This theme comes to a tragic head in Book 6 of the *Hellenica*. At a peace conference in 372 B.C., three Athenian ambassadors deliver moving speeches to the Spartans. The last of them, Callistratus (Xen. *Hell.* 6.3.10–17), implored the Spartans to put aside their continual grasping (*pleonexia*) and exercise self-restraint (*enkrateia*). The Athenians had already learned the hard way that overreaching (*to pleonektein*) was unprofitable (*akerdes*). His words hit home, and the Spartans agreed to unite with the Athenians in a joint hegemony whose basis was respecting the autonomy of each polis and fostering peace among the Greeks. This was the first step toward a new political order for Greece, based on international rules and cooperative principles. Tragically, a disagreement with the Thebans derailed the experiment, and the very next chapter (Xen. *Hell*. 6.4) tells of the Battle of Leuctra.

Xenophon's panhellenic dream was not a way of justifying the imperial ambitions but rather ran counter to both. The two cities of course had an outsized role to play in Greece, but they needed a fresh start. The needed to respect the autonomy of the individual cities, exercise self-restraint and virtue, and win the willing allegiance of their subjects. From these beginnings perhaps a workable league could arise.

Yet, the dream was never realized. Xenophon perhaps had hoped to write about the origin of τὸ Ἑλληνικόν, but in the end he had to confine himself to τὰ Ἑλληνικά.

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